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The Top Five Regrets of the Dying

A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing

'Ware writes of the phenomenal clarity of vision that people gain at the end of their lives, and how we might learn from their wisdom.'
The Guardian

BRONNIE WARE

'This book had a profound effect on my life.'

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'Ware writes of the phenomenal clarity of vision that people gain at the end of their lives, and how we might learn from their wisdom.'

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The Top Five Regrets of the Dying

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The Top Five Regrets of the Dying

A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing

Bronnie Ware

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For Mum and Gran,
whose unwavering love and
support have propelled my
discovery of courage.

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Introduction

The wind howled with fierce determination outside a tiny cottage in the Blue Mountains of Australia. With a cup of tea nearby I was cosy inside, typing away happily while absorbed in my writing. It was 2009 and the second article for my newly formed blog, *Inspiration and Chai* was unravelling. The article was called *Regrets of the Dying*. It flowed completely of its own accord, without hesitation, simply drawing upon powerful, clear memories. For the previous eight years I had repeatedly been offered lessons and life-changing insights, while sitting by the bedsides of dying people as their carer and listener.

The article spread like wildfire to all corners of the globe. After numerous requests, I found the courage to share the wisdom in more depth. To do so, I had to tell my own story and how the regrets of dying people had changed me. My real-life journey into regret-free living was an example of life's challenges. There was no point just sharing the regrets. I had done that in the article. When some of my dying patients had insisted I share their message onward, they meant so others could fully grasp the anguish and heartache that dying with regrets causes. They wanted me to help others find the courage they had lacked.

As I set about creating my own regret-free life while still caring for dying people and afterwards, I came to understand just how difficult it is to let go of all that stops us being our absolute best self. Living regret-free is not something achievable in a flash. It is created by an ongoing day-to-day process of conscious decisions, loving actions to ourselves, and a whole bucket full of courage. It is my heartfelt intention and hope that this book assists you find that courage for change.

This memoir is now in 31 languages and has been read by more than a million people worldwide, with a film in the pipeline. The importance of the message is clearly one that resonates with people from all walks of life. After all, we are all going to die, and none of us wishes to do so with regrets. In our heart, we want to live our best life, which also includes daring to be our best self.

As I've watched this book's journey unfold and have evolved further in myself, as we do over time, I have felt very blessed to be the messenger for this tale. Even more so, I am incredibly grateful to have witnessed the reality of death and regret. Facing this has given me courage on many occasions, when life felt too hard. Finding the courage to act or surrender will never be as painful as lying on a deathbed with regrets.

I am very grateful to my publisher, Hay House, for giving me the opportunity for this second edition. *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying* was originally published independently in its raw form, after being rejected by 25 publishers. Once it caught its wave, there was no time to edit, prior to it being professionally published. Whatever magic this book originally had was independent of any composition or grammatical rules. I simply wrote as I would to a friend, sharing my tale and those of the patients I came to love.

This edition, therefore, is not edited in a traditional way, following formulas or rules. It is simply a tidy-up of grammar and a tightening of the message in parts. My life and writing style have evolved in the ten years since that first wintery experience in the Blue Mountains. So it is lovely to be able to bring a little of the essence of how my own journey unfolded to this second edition, while not losing the power of the message from the dear people I cared for.

While this book continues to reach into ever-increasing numbers of hands and hearts around the world, I have noticed it gives people permission to make changes and find immense courage. It allows tears to flow and hearts to lift. It supports forgiveness and teaches kindness. It also reinforces just how sacred and precious life is.

May the remainder of your life be changed in the best of ways through the sharing of this tale.

With loving kindness,
Bronnie

From the tropics to the snow

'I can't find my teeth. I can't find my teeth.' The familiar call flowed into the room as I attempted to have my scheduled afternoon off. Placing the book I was reading on the bed, I wandered out into the living area.

As expected, Agnes was standing there looking both confused and innocent, smiling her gummy grin. We both burst out laughing. The joke should have worn thin by now, as the misplacement of her teeth happened at least every few days. But it never did.

'I am sure you do this just to get me back out here with you,' I laughed, as I began today's search in now familiar places. Outside snow continued to fall, enhancing the cosiness and warmth of the cottage. Shaking her head, Agnes was adamant. 'Not at all, darling! I took them out before my nap but when I awoke, I couldn't find them anywhere.' Other than her memory loss, she was as bright as a button.

Agnes and I came to be living together four months earlier, when I had responded to an advertisement for a live-in companion. As an Australian in England, I had been doing a live-in job in a pub to keep a roof over my head. It had been fun and some lovely friendships were made with other staff and the locals. Bar skills were definitely handy and had enabled me to start work

immediately on arrival in the country. So for that, I was grateful. But it came time for a change.

The two years prior to going overseas were spent living on a tropical island, as picturesque as any postcard could ever portray. After more than a decade of working in the banking industry, I had needed to try an existence that released me from the Monday to Friday, nine to five grind.

One of my sisters and I ventured to an island in North Queensland for a holiday, to gain our scuba diving certificates. While she cracked onto our diving instructor, which was of course very beneficial for us in passing our tests, I climbed a mountain on the island. While sitting on an enormous boulder in the sky, smiling, I had an epiphany. I wanted to live on an island.

Four weeks later, the bank job was no more, and my belongings were either sold or sent to a shed on my parents' farm. Two islands were chosen from a map, simply for their geographic suitability. I knew nothing else about these islands, other than I liked their location and there was a resort on each of them. This was before the internet enabled us to find out anything about everything in a flash. With application letters in the mail, I headed north, destination unknown. It was 1991, also before mobile phones, which arrived en masse in Australia a few years later.

Along the way, my carefree spirit was given a timely and cautious warning through a hitchhiking experience. The driver turned off the highway onto a dirt road that showed few signs of regular visitors. He said he wanted to show me where he lived, as houses faded away and bushland thickened, way off track from the requested town. Thankfully I stayed strong and determined, managing to talk myself out of the situation. Only a few slobbery

kisses were attempted from him as I finally exited the car, *rather* quickly, in the right town. That was the end of my hitchhiking.

After that I stuck to public transport. Other than that awful experience, it was a great adventure, particularly not knowing where I would end up living next. Travelling on various buses and trains ensured my path crossed with some great people, while I was being transported to warmer climates. A few weeks into the trip I called my mum, who had received a letter telling me there was a job waiting on one of the chosen islands. Being desperate to escape the banking grind, I had made the ridiculous mistake of saying I was willing to take any job, so a few days later I was living on a beautiful island, up to my elbows in filthy pots and pans.

Island life was a fantastic experience. It not only released me from the Monday to Friday grind, but also from even knowing what day of the week it was. I loved it. After a year of being what was not so affectionately known as a dish-pig, I worked my way into the bar. The time in the kitchen had actually been a lot of fun and taught me a wealth of things about creative cookery. But it was hot, hard, sweaty work in a non air-conditioned kitchen in the tropics. Days off at least were spent wandering magnificent rainforests, hiring boats and cruising to nearby islands, scuba diving, or just kicking back in paradise.

Volunteering in the bar eventually opened the door for me into this coveted role. Overlooking a million dollar view of perfect calm blue waters, white sands, palm trees swaying, the whole thing, it was not a hard job. Dealing with happy customers who were having the holiday of their lives, and becoming adept at mixing cocktails worthy of travel brochure photos, was a world away from the previous life I'd known in banking.

It was over the bar that I met a man from Europe, who offered me a job at his printing company. Travel yearnings had always been a part of me and after more than two years of island life, I was starting to crave some change and the thought of being somewhat anonymous again. When you live and work within the same community, day in day out, privacy in your everyday living becomes sacred.

Culture shock was to be expected for anyone returning to mainland life after a couple of years on an island. But to throw myself from that into a foreign country where I couldn't even speak the language was challenging to say the least. Some nice people crossed my path during those months and I am glad to have had the experience. But I needed some like-minded friends again, so eventually headed off to England. I arrived there with only enough money for a travel card to get to the one person I knew in the country. With £1.66 left over, a new chapter began.

Nev had a lovely big smile and a head of thinning white curls. He was also a wine connoisseur, appropriately working in the wine department at Harrods. It was the first day of the store's summer sale. Coming straight from the overnight ferry across the channel, I certainly looked like the waif I was wandering into that classy, busy joint. 'Hi Nev. I'm Bronnie. We met once, do you remember? I'm a friend of Fiona's. You crashed out on my beanbag a few years ago,' I announced to him over the counter with a cheerful grin.

'Of course Bronnie,' I was relieved to hear. 'What's happening?'

'I need a place to stay for a few nights please,' I said rather hopefully.

Reaching into his pocket for his key, Nev replied, 'Sure. Here you go.' And with that I had directions to his place and a roof over my head, sleeping on his sofa.

'May I also borrow ten quid please?' I asked optimistically. Without hesitation, ten quid came out of his back pocket. Offering words of thanks and a cheerful smile in reply, I was sorted. I had a bed and food.

The travel magazine I had intended to find a job from came out that morning, so I picked up a copy, went home to Nev's and made three phone calls. By the next morning, I was being interviewed for a live-in pub job in Surrey. By that afternoon, I was living there. Perfect.

Life rolled on for a couple of years with friendships and romance. They were fun times. Village life suited me, reminding me of the island community at times, and I was surrounded by people I had come to love. We were also not far out of London, so regular trips happened easily, most of which I thoroughly enjoyed.

But further travel was calling. I wanted to check out a bit of the Middle East. The long English winters were good experiences and I was glad to have done a couple of them. They were a complete contrast to the long, hot summers of Australia. But I had a choice to stay or go, and decided to stay for one more winter, determined to save some money for the trip. To do this, I needed to remove myself from the pub scene and the temptation to be out socialising every night. I was never much of a drinker, but being out and about every night still cost money that could take me travelling instead.

Almost as soon as I'd made that decision, the job advertisement for the role with Agnes caught my eye, as it was only a county away in Surrey. The position was offered to me at my first interview,

when Bill the farmer realised I was a farm girl myself. His mother, Agnes, was in her late eighties, had shoulder length grey hair, a cheerful voice, and a huge round stomach, covered almost every day by the same red and grey cardigan. Their farm was only half an hour's drive away from my friends, so seeing everyone on days off was easy enough. But it felt like a different world while I was there. It was very isolating, as I was with Agnes around the clock from Sunday evening until Friday evening. Two hours off every afternoon didn't allow much time for socialising, though I did use that time occasionally to see my English man.

Dean was a darling person. It was humour that linked us from the very start, within the first minute of meeting. Our love of music also bonded us. We had met the day after I arrived in the country, just after the interview for the pub job, and it soon became obvious that both of our lives were richer and funnier for knowing each other. Unfortunately, it wasn't Dean's company I was now keeping most. I was usually snowed in with Agnes and—more often than not—busy looking for her teeth. It was amazing how many different locations within such a small home Agnes could lose her teeth in.

Her dog Princess was a ten-year-old German Shepherd who shed hair everywhere. She was sweet-natured but was losing strength in her hind legs from arthritis. Apparently, this is a common condition in this breed of dog. Learning from past experience, I lifted up her rump and looked underneath for her lady's teeth. No luck today. On another occasion she had sat on them, so it was always worth a look. Princess wagged her big tail then returned to her dreams by the fire, forgetting the brief disturbance in a second.

Agnes and I crossed each other's path repeatedly, as we continued the search. 'They're not here!' she would call from the bedroom.

'They're not here either,' I'd reply from the kitchen. Inevitably we would swap places and I would find myself searching the bedroom, and Agnes the kitchen. There are only so many rooms to search in a little home, so we covered them all to be doubly sure. On this particular day they had slipped into her knitting bag, beside the lounge chair.

'Oh you are a treasure, darling,' she said, putting them back in her mouth. 'Come and watch television with me now that you're out here.' This was a strategy that was often used and I smiled as I went along with her request. She was an old lady who had lived alone a long time and was enjoying the company. My book could wait. It was hardly as if the job was strenuous. It was simply companionship and if she needed that outside of my scheduled work hours, no worries.

The teeth had previously been found under her cushion, back in the bathroom vanity, in a teacup in the kitchen cupboard, in her handbag, and numerous other hardly-believable places. They had also turned up behind the television, in the fireplace, in the rubbish bin, on top of the fridge, and in her shoe. And of course under Princess, the mighty German Shepherd's backside.

Routine works for a lot of people. I thrive on change. But routine has its place and certainly works best for many people, particularly as they are getting older. There were weekly routines and daily routines with Agnes. Every Monday we went to the doctors, as Agnes had regular blood tests. The appointment was at the exact same time every week. One thing per day was enough or it would ruin her afternoon routine of rest and knitting.

Princess came everywhere with us—rain, hail or shine. The tailgate of the pick-up would be lowered first. The old dog would wait patiently, always wagging her tail. She was a gorgeous creature. I would then lift her front paws onto the tailgate and quickly grab her rear and lift her up fully, before the rear legs gave way and we had to start again. I would then be covered in sandy-coloured dog hair for the remainder of the outing.

Hopping down was easier, though she still required assistance. Princess would drop down herself, so that her front legs were on the ground. Then she would wait for me to lift her hind legs down. If Agnes needed me to help her in any way in between, Princess would wait in that position with her backside in the air until I was ready. Once down, she walked happily and painlessly, always wagging that big, old tail.

Tuesdays were spent grocery shopping in the nearby village. A lot of elderly people I have worked with since have been very frugal. Agnes was the opposite. She always tried to buy me things, particularly whatever I didn't need or want. Every aisle would see the same two women, one elderly and one young, arguing with each other. Both would be smiling and sometimes laughing, yet both of us were determined. As a result, I would end up with half of what Agnes wanted to buy me. This could be various vegetarian delicacies, imported mangoes, a new hairbrush, a singlet, or some terrible tasting toothpaste.

Wednesdays were bingo, again in the local village. Her sight was deteriorating, so I was Agnes' eyes for confirmation at bingo. She could read the numbers okay and hear relatively well, but checked with me to be sure, before crossing off each number. I loved all of the old people there. I was in my late twenties and

the only young one, so Agnes felt very special. She would describe me as 'my friend'.

'Well, my friend and I went shopping yesterday and I bought her some new underpants,' she would announce seriously and proudly to all of her elderly bingo friends.

Everyone would nod and smile at me as I sat there thinking, 'Oh brother!'

On she would go. 'Her mother wrote to her this week from Australia. It is very hot there at the moment, you know. And she has a new nephew.' Again the heads would nod and smile.

It didn't take me long to learn about editing how much information I gave her. I hate to think what they would have known of my life otherwise, particularly when Mum posted me some lovely lingerie and other gifts, to pamper me from afar. It was all innocent and loving with Agnes though. So I managed to endure the blushing and cringing she sometimes caused me.

Thursdays were the only day we stayed out over lunch. It was a big day out for the three of us, Princess included, of course. We would drive to a town in Kent and have lunch with her daughter. Thirty miles was a long way away by English standards, but just down the road for an Australian.

Our perspective of distance is a definite cultural difference. In England, you can drive two miles and be in a whole new village. The accent will be totally different from the previous village and you may not know anyone, even if you have lived in the other village all of your life. In Australia, you can drive fifty miles for a loaf of bread. Your neighbours can be so far away they ring you up or speak to you on the two-way radio to say hello, but they still think of you as their neighbour. I once worked in an area in

the Northern Territory that was so remote they flew planes to get to the nearest pub. The little airstrip would be full of single and two-seater planes early in the evening but totally empty by next morning, when they had all flown home to their cattle stations, half full of grog.

So the big day out on Thursdays was indeed a big day out for Agnes, but a lovely leisurely drive for me. Her daughter was a gentle woman and the occasions pleasant. The two of them always had a ploughman's lunch, with beef, cheese and pickles. I often marvelled at how the English love their pickles. It was a good country for vegetarians too. So my choices were never terribly limited. Being so cold, I usually enjoyed a warming soup or a hearty pasta dish.

Fridays were spent very locally. We lived on a cattle farm run by two of Agnes' sons, with its own butcher shop. Our outing on Friday mornings was always to this butcher shop. Although Agnes insisted on taking her time and looking at everything in great detail, she bought the same things every week, exactly. The butcher even offered to deliver her order, but no. 'Thank you very much but I must come and make my choice here,' she would reply politely.

In those days I was a vegetarian. I am a vegan now. Yet here I was living on a cattle farm, not unlike the way I'd grown up. Even though I didn't advocate eating meat, I did understand the business and the lifestyle. It was familiar territory, after all.

We would wander back from the butcher shop and walk through the barn, talking to the farmhands and to the cows. Agnes would plod along slowly with her walking stick; I was close by her side, with Princess behind us. It didn't matter how cold

the weather, we would just wear more layers. Fridays were always spent that way, visiting the shop then the cows in their barn.

I marvelled at how differently English cows were treated to Australian cows, with their warm barns and individual attention. But Australian cows don't have to endure English winters. It still made me terribly sad to get to know these cows on an individual basis, knowing we would probably be buying their flesh from the butcher shop at a later date. It was a hard thing to come to terms with, and I never really succeeded in doing so.

The vegetarian thing came up a lot at Agnes' home, despite my attempted silence and my respect for the family's chosen lifestyle. I wasn't the kind of vegetarian or vegan to be overly verbal about it. Having seen what I have in my upbringing though, including being taken on a life-scarring school excursion to an abattoir, I do understand why some vegos get so vocal and passionate. It is heartbreaking when you find the bravery to look honestly at these industries and see what goes on behind the walls.

But I preferred to just live quietly and simply by example, respecting everyone's right to live the way that made sense to him or her. I only spoke of my beliefs if I was asked and then I was happy to, since there was a genuine interest.

When Agnes started questioning me about why I was a vegetarian, I hesitated. Her very survival was based on the income from their cattle farm. In effect mine was too, although I hadn't related to that immediately. I took the job simply with the intention of saving money and brightening up an old lady's life.

Agnes persisted with her questions. So I told her about my feelings of watching cattle and sheep being killed when I was a child and how it affected me; how much I loved animals; and how

I had noticed that cows mooed differently when they knew they were about to die. Their sounds of terror and panic still haunt me.

That was it. Agnes declared her vegetarianism on the spot. 'Oh boy,' I thought. 'How am I going to explain this one to her family?' I spoke about it with her son, Bill, soon after and he then spoke to Agnes of his desire for her to continue eating meat. There was little budging her at first, but she finally accepted eating red meat one day a week, fish one day per week and chicken another day. The family fed her on my days off, so she would be eating meat then too.

Over time my views have strengthened and now I would not even consider accepting a job that involved cooking flesh. I did back then though, and hated that part of my role. I could never cook meat without being saddened that this was once a beautiful living thing. So I liked this new arrangement instantly, even though fish and chicken were certainly still animals, by my way of thinking.

It turned out that Agnes had only agreed with Bill in order to keep the peace. She had no intention of eating any meat at all during the week. So I spent the remaining winter and spring months cooking us up delicious vegetarian feasts of nut-loaf bakes, divine soups, colourful stir-fries and gourmet pizzas. I think Agnes would have happily lived on boiled eggs otherwise and, of course, baked beans. She was English after all and the English do love their beans.

The snow melted and the daffodils heralded spring. Days grew longer and blue skies returned. As the farm came to life again, newborn calves ran around on their wobbly legs. Birds returned and greeted us in song every day. Princess moulted even more.

Agnes and I removed our winter coats and hats, and carried on with our same routine for another couple of months, enjoying the spring sunshine. We were two women of very different generations, walking arm in arm day after day, as we shared continuous laughter and stories.

Travel was still calling. We had both known from the start that I would be going. I was missing Dean too. The weekends were not enough time together anymore and we were keen to head off travelling. My job was advertised and our time together started winding up. Those months with Agnes were a wonderful and special experience. Although I had accepted the job mostly for the benefit of my travel yearnings, companionship was beautiful work.

It was much more enjoyable than pulling beers. I would rather help someone walk steadily because she is old and frail, rather than someone who is young and drunk, or even old and drunk. I had done plenty of both during my employment on the island and in the English pub. I much preferred looking for an old lady's teeth to removing dirty ashtrays and empty pint glasses.

Dean and I travelled to the Middle East, where we marvelled at vastly different but fascinating cultures (and ate heaps of delicious food). After a wonderful year or so away, I went back to visit Agnes. Another Australian girl had replaced me and we had an enjoyable long yarn, after Agnes had drifted off to sleep in her armchair. Sharing lots of stories, she admitted to being somewhat puzzled by the first question Bill had asked when he interviewed her. I asked what that was and cracked up laughing when she told me that the very first question Bill had asked was: 'You're not a vegetarian, *are you*?'

An unexpected career path

After those years in England and the Middle East, I finally came home to my beloved Australia. I was a changed person, as one is after travel. Returning to work in the banking industry, it soon became obvious that this work would never satisfy me again. Customer service was the only highlight of the role and while it was easy to pick up work in any town, I was restless and desperately unhappy in my working life.

Creative expression was starting to flow from me. Now living in Western Australia, I sat by the Swan River in Perth and made two lists. On one list was what I was good at; on the other one, what I loved to do. From this I had to acknowledge there was an artist of sorts within me, as the only things that landed in both columns were creative talents.

'Dare I think I could be an artist?' I thought to myself. Despite growing up around musicians, the reliability of a 'good job' has also been instilled in me. No-one in my family could understand my restlessness with a steady nine-to-five existence in the banking game. They were 'good jobs': good jobs that were slowly but surely killing me.

Intensive soul-searching unfolded, as I tried to work out what I could do well but also enjoy. They were hard times. Everything

was changing within me. I finally came to the conclusion I would have to eventually work from the heart, as working only from the intellect left me too empty and dissatisfied. So I began developing my creative skills through writing and photography, which led to songwriting and eventually performing, in a long and roundabout way. All the while I was still working in banking jobs, mostly as temporary staff by this time. The trappings of a full-time job were no longer possible to endure.

Perth was a long way from anywhere. As much as I loved living there, the desire to be more accessible to those I cherished saw the eastern states calling me back. So across the mighty Nullarbor Plains it was, through the Flinders Ranges, along the Great Ocean Road, up through the New England Highway, until Queensland declared itself home for the next while. For some of this time, I worked in a call centre for people subscribing to an adult movie channel. It was far more interesting than the banking industry at times.

'Um.'

Silence.

'I'm just ringing up for my husband.'

'So you would like to subscribe to *Night Moves* then?' I would reply in a friendly, accepting tone, always putting the women at ease.

Or the guys would ask: 'What's it like? I mean. Do you see *everything*?'

'I am sorry, sir. I've not viewed it myself. But I can offer you a one-night trial for $6.95 and if you like it enough, you can call back and subscribe on a monthly basis.'

And of course, there were the expected calls of: 'What colour knickers have you got on?' The disconnect button came in very

handy at times. But despite the subject matter, it was really just another office job. My restlessness continued to fester.

We moved back to my home state of New South Wales. Dean, the man I had been with in England and the Middle East, had moved back to Australia with me. Soon after relocating to New South Wales, our relationship came to an end. We had loved each other dearly for years and had been best friends for most of that time. It was devastating to watch our friendship fall apart, but our numerous lifestyle differences could no longer be swept under the carpet or laughed off, as we had been doing.

I was a vegetarian. He was meat eater. Working indoors all week, I longed for outdoor life all weekend. He worked outdoors all week and wanted to be indoors all weekend. The list went on and on, and seemed to grow larger by the week. The things each of us delighted in, no longer delighted the other. A mutual love of music still bonded us and kept us hanging in there for a while. But in the end, the communication channel between us lost its strength and we each battled with our own loss, watching our shared dreams disintegrate before our eyes.

It was a heartbreaking time, as our relationship finished and the grief of such a loss arrived. Curling up in a ball sobbing, wishing we could have made it work, I knew in my heart we couldn't. Life was calling us in different directions and the relationship was now hindering our paths, rather than helping them.

The search for more meaning in my life intensified and as a result, the work issue increased in prominence. I woke up to the fact that being an artist is a very hard way to survive, until your work has gained momentum and a healthy reputation, so meanwhile I had to find a new direction. Surviving as an artist

was going to be possible eventually. If I could dream it, I could do it after all. But I needed to earn money and to do so in a field that allowed me to work from the heart, being my natural self.

The pressure of selling products within the banking industry had increased and I had changed too much. I no longer fitted into that world, if I ever truly had. Determined to continue on my creative journey, I made the choice to work as a live-in companion again. At least then I wouldn't be stuck in a rent or a mortgage grind, which would also free me up from the rigidity of routine.

Despite the years of soul-searching that had led me to this point, the final decision was almost a casual, flippant one. Simply, I'd take a job as a companion for the benefit of my creative path and to work from the heart, all the while enabling me to live rent-free. I had no idea that my yearnings for a heartfelt job had been so clearly heard, and the years to follow were in themselves going to be such a significant part of my life and my life's work.

Within two weeks, I had moved into a harbourside home in one of the Sydney's most exclusive suburbs. My client Ruth had been found by her elderly brother, unconscious on her kitchen floor. After more than a month in hospital she was allowed home, providing she had 24-hour care.

My only experience in the care industry had been companionship with Agnes those years prior. I had not looked after sick people and was honest about this to the agency employing me, but they didn't mind. Carers who were willing to live-in were a commodity. They were not going to let me slip through their net. 'Just pretend you know what you're doing and call us if you need any help.' Puzzled and desperate, I agreed.

Although a beginner, my natural empathy enabled me to do the job reasonably well. I simply treated Ruth as I would my own grandmother, who had been precious to me. Catering to her needs as they surfaced, I worked it out as I went along. The community nurse would come in every few days and ask me questions about things I had no idea about. Because I was honest with her, she helped enormously as I learnt about medications, personal care and industry jargon.

My employers would drop in now and then. Happy to see that the client was happy was enough for them, and off they'd go. They had no idea I was rapidly becoming emotionally and physically exhausted. I am not sure I'd realised it myself.

Ruth's family was pleased because I was spoiling Ruth rotten. There were foot massages, manicures, facials and lots of lovely bedside conversations over cups of tea. Like I say, I treated her as I would my own dear grandmother. I didn't know any other way.

Ruth would ring her bell throughout the night too and I'd be down the stairs in a flash, helping her onto the bedside commode to go to the toilet. 'Oh, you are glamorous,' she would to say to me as I wandered in. Her impression of my glamour was that I sometimes wore my hair in a bun to bed, simply because I was too exhausted to get the knots out. And my 'glamorous' nightdress was due to my mother's insistence I take it.

'You can't go to this lady's place and sleep naked or in any old thing,' Mum had pleaded. 'Please take this and promise me you will wear it.' So to honour my mother's wishes, I found myself wearing a satin nightdress to bed. I certainly didn't feel glamorous, half sleepwalking into Ruth's bedroom four or five times a night, eyes struggling to open, longing for reprieve from my exhausted

state. Ruth would need me all of the following day too, so I had little chance of catching up on a few hours' sleep. Housework was tackled during Ruth's afternoon naps.

Even while sitting on the commode, Ruth would want to talk. She loved all of the attention, after years of living on her own. I was enjoying our friendship too, except for hearing about what cups and saucers they had used at whatever dinner party thirty years ago, while she urinated on the commode at three in the morning, my body just longing to return to bed.

Over the weeks, Ruth spoke of the years around the bay and of the children playing down by the harbour. Horse and dray, plodding along through all of the quiet streets, had done the milk and bread deliveries. Sundays would see the neighbourhood all dressed in their best clothes for church. Ruth spoke about her children when they were young and of her husband long since passed. Her daughter Heather, who I found to be delightful, would drop in every day or two and was a breath of fresh air. Ruth's son and his family lived out in the country. Had Heather not mentioned her brother, it would have been easy to forget his existence. He did not play an active role in his mother's life.

Heather was the rock that supported Ruth throughout her decades as a widow. Ruth's elderly brother, James, also helped. He would wander down from his home about a mile away, every afternoon. You could set the clock by his visit. There he was in the same sweater, day in, day out. He was 88 years old and had never married. With a mind as clear as they come, he was a wonderful character and it was my pleasure to get to know him and enjoy the simplicity of his life.

However, Ruth was not recovering from her illness and was still in bed after a month. More tests were done and it was then I was informed she was dying.

Walking down to the harbour with tears in my eyes, everything felt surreal. Children were playing in the shallow water. The footbridge hanging over the bay swung lightly, as happy people walked over it. Ferries cruised by on their way to Circular Quay in the city centre. I walked as in a dream, as laughter rang out from a group of people having a picnic.

Sitting against a sandstone cliff, the water almost at my feet, I looked up at the beautiful sky. It was one of those perfect winter days, when the warmth of the sun is like a balm. Sydney is never totally freezing in winter, not like European cities. It was a glorious day and a light coat was sufficient. Having already grown close to Ruth, the thought of her passing left me tearful for my own inevitable pain. The shock that I would be losing her was my first reaction. As my tears flowed, a yacht sailed by, full of happy, healthy people. It then also hit me that I would be her carer, the one nursing her until the end.

Growing up on a cattle farm, then a sheep farm, I had seen a lot of animals dying or dead. It was not new to me, although I was always terribly sensitive to it. But the society I was living in, the modern society of Western culture, was not one that exposed its people to dying bodies on a regular basis. It wasn't like some other cultures, where human death is out in the open and a very visible part of everyday life.

Our society has shut death out, almost as a denial of its existence. This denial leaves both the dying person and the family or friends totally unprepared for something that is inevitable. We

are all going to die. But rather than acknowledge the existence of death, we try to hide it. It is as if we are trying to convince ourselves that 'out of sight, out of mind' really works. But it doesn't, because we carry on trying to validate ourselves through our material life and associated fearful behaviour instead.

If we are to be able to face our own inevitable death with honest acceptance, before we have reached that time, then we need to shift our priorities well before it's too late. This gives us the opportunity to put our energies into directions of true value. Once we acknowledge that limited time is remaining, although we don't know if that is years, weeks or hours, we are less driven by ego or by what other people think. Instead, we are more driven by what our hearts truly want. Acknowledging our inevitable, approaching death offers us the opportunity to find greater purpose and satisfaction in the time we have remaining.

I came to realise how detrimental this denial is in our society. But at the time, on that sunny winter's day, I was completely ignorant of what lay ahead with Ruth and of my role in caring for her. Resting my head back against the sandstone wall, I prayed for strength. Having already faced plenty of challenges in my upbringing and adult life, I believed I wouldn't have been brought to this place had I not been capable of doing the job. This didn't particularly ease my personal sadness and pain.

Sitting in the warmth of the sun that day, quiet tears falling, I knew I had a job to do: to provide Ruth with whatever happiness and comfort was possible in her dying weeks. I certainly hadn't seen this coming, but I accepted that I had gifts to share and this was what life was asking me to do. Walking back to the house,

a strong resolve developed within me. I would give this situation the absolute best I had, and would catch up on sleep later.

My employer dropped in later that day. Explaining that I had never even seen a dead person, let alone cared for someone towards their passing, I heard my words fall on deaf ears. 'The family loves you. You'll be right.' *You'll be right* (as in *You'll be alright*) is such a common expression in Australian language that I accepted I would be.

Ruth's deterioration was quite fast from that point. Other carers came in to relieve me on days off and as her needs increased, I was relieved of night duty. I was still called on by the other carers, as I oversaw the running of things. But at least sleep was possible.

The days were still special. More often than not, it was just Ruth and I. It was a quiet neighbourhood, with occasional laughter ringing up through the trees from the harbourside park below. Heather would drop in on us, as would James, plus a string of specialists doing their jobs. The learning on offer was immense as I grew in my role. I did whatever needed doing and asked a lot of questions from everyone I could.

One morning as I was about to leave for two days off, excited to be heading out of the city to visit my cousin and enjoy some lightness after the weight of it all, I noticed a smell from the bedroom. The night carer had either not noticed it or had not wanted to, hoping it could be left for the day carer who was about to come on. I saw a lot of this in coming years.

There was no way I could leave my beautiful friend lying in it for another minute. Her bowels had emptied completely. Lying limp, Ruth was only able to reply to me with quiet grunts. Her major organs were collapsing. The night carer reluctantly tore

herself away from a gossip magazine and helped me, as we cleaned this gentle woman and changed the sheets from underneath her. It was a relief when the day carer arrived, dropped everything and pitched in immediately with pleasant cheer. We had Ruth clean and resting, and in no time she was in a deep sleep, exhausted.

Sitting out in the bush with my cousin later that day, my heart was still back at the house. Welcoming the lightness and humour his company always provides, I was grateful to be hanging out with him. But it was not going to be possible for me to stay away for two nights. Ruth was too much in my thoughts and I was sure she didn't have that long left. I had only been at my cousin's for a few hours when my employer called, saying Ruth was in her last stages. Could I come?

Arriving back around dark, the sombre mood of the house was palpable before I even walked inside. Heather was there with her husband, as well as the new night carer who had just arrived, a lovely Irish girl.

Heather asked if I'd mind her going home. I replied gently that she had to do whatever felt right for her, so home it was. After she had left, it was initially a little difficult for me to remove judgement from the situation. I could only imagine my own mother dying and how I would move heaven and earth to be with her at her passing.

They say that everything comes down to love or fear: every emotion, every action, and every thought. I concluded that fear was driving Heather's decision and with that I felt a rush of compassion and love for her. From the start of our association, I had found her to be a very practical person and somewhat detached. But this situation was foreign to me. I didn't want my own beliefs and conditioning to hinder my regard for someone I had come

to care for, simply because she handled things differently to how I would have.

Sitting in the darkened room with Erin, the other carer, I came to accept and respect Heather's actions. She did what she'd had to do, because she had done all she could. For decades, she had kept her mother's life in order, as well as that of her own family. She was now completely and totally exhausted, both physically and emotionally. She had given all she possibly could and wanted to remember her mum sleeping peacefully. I smiled with respect and my assumed understanding.

In conversation with Heather in the days afterwards, however, I was told that Ruth had implied to Heather that she wanted her to go. Heather knew her mother well enough to read her wishes. It had been through love that she left, not fear at all. Similar situations became somewhat familiar in the years to come. Not every dying person wanted his or her family there. They said their goodbyes while conscious and occasionally preferred to be seen out by carers, allowing their families to keep other memories instead.

Erin and I chatted quietly in Ruth's room, with death a lingering presence. Erin explained how in her family, the room would be filled with everyone by now. Aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbours, and children—everyone would come along to say his or her farewell, to send the person out.

We fell into spells of silence, both of us looking at Ruth, watching and waiting. The night was incredibly still, as I quietly sent Ruth love from my heart. Erin and I would chat a little again, then go back into silence. She was the perfect person to share the experience with, as she cared so naturally.

'She's opened her eyes,' Erin suddenly said to me, startled. Ruth had been in a semi-coma for several hours until then. 'She's looking at you.'

I moved closer to the bed and held Ruth's hand. 'I'm here, sweetheart. It's okay.'

She looked directly into my eyes and a moment later her spirit began to leave her body. It shook for a short time. Then all was still.

Instantly, tears rolled down my cheeks. Speaking silently to her from my heart, I thanked Ruth for what we had shared, told her I loved her and wished her well on her journey. It was a reverent moment, full of stillness and love. Standing in the darkened room, all of my senses alive, I silently thought what blessings I had been given by having this time with her.

Then Ruth's body surprisingly took another huge breath. I jumped back, swearing, my heart beating out of my chest. 'Holy shit!' I said to Erin.

She smiled gently. 'That's quite normal you know, Bronnie. It happens a lot.'

'Yes, well, thanks for telling me,' I replied in shock, smiling at her. My heart was pounding hard and all of the reverence of the moment was gone. I stepped back beside the bed with hesitation. 'Is it going to happen again?' I whispered to Erin.

'It could.'

We waited in silence for another minute or so, hardly breathing ourselves. 'She's gone, Erin. I can feel she's gone,' I finally said.

'God bless her,' we both uttered quietly, at the same time. Moving our chairs closer, we sat with Ruth for a while in sacred silence and loving respect. I also needed to settle a bit, after the fright of the moment before.

Heather and my employer had asked me to call them when it had happened, which I did. It was about 2.30am; there was no more either of them could do now. I had been directed earlier that day how to proceed from here. I called the doctor to come and issue the death certificate. When that was done, I called the funeral home.

Erin and I sat in the kitchen until Ruth's body was taken away around daybreak. During those hours of waiting, we both went back to look in on Ruth at times. It was a compulsion to still care for her body, even though she had departed from it. I didn't like her being in the room alone. The strange, dark time afterwards was very special in a way, but there was also a tangible emptiness in the home after she had passed over.

Ruth's home was offered to me the next day as a house-sitting situation. Heather said it would take months for the estate to settle and the family would feel more secure having someone living in it. So I stayed on in Ruth's home for some time, which was a blessing for my physical situation. It was also good to be somewhere that had now become familiar to me.

I had come to realise that around-the-clock, live-in work was going to be too exhausting for me. Never being able to do anything by halves, I now understood I would need to remove myself from future patients between shifts, by going home each night. Care work asked much more of me than straightforward companionship.

Over the following months, I watched and assisted as Heather moved Ruth's belongings on to new places. Her physical world was dismantled one piece at a time. I had been nomadic for so long that I still had an aversion to owning too much. As a result, I declined many things Heather kindly offered to me. They were

just things after all, and while they had belonged to my friend Ruth, I knew her memory would stay on in my heart.

I did fall in love with a couple of old lamps and they are with me to this day. Ruth's home was later demolished by the new owners and replaced with a modern concrete creation. The old frangipani tree that had thrown summer scents throughout the home for decades was crushed in the blink of an eye and replaced with a lap pool. An invitation arrived for me to the housewarming party at the new place.

The people who had bought Ruth's home had been uncomfortable with the spiders and their webs across the trees in her garden. Ruth and I had loved them, as we sat in the sunroom watching the golden orb spider weave a web so strong you could lift it up to walk under. Standing near the lap pool now, looking at all of the new, fashionable plants that had replaced an established garden of love and longevity, I was delighted to see a golden orb spider weaving her web high across one of the new plants.

I sent love to Ruth with a smile and knew that, in her own way, she was visiting me there that day. Her home may have gone but her spirit was with me. I thanked the new owner for the invitation, had a chat and walked down to the harbour. Sitting where I had the day I first heard about Ruth being terminally ill, I felt grateful for all we had shared and for all I had learnt through our association.

On that summer's day I smiled, realising just how much more I had been given—a lot more than just living rent-free. As the happy day unfolded before me, I continued to smile in gratitude. And by having directed my vision to that golden orb spider, Ruth had already smiled back.

Honesty and surrender

A few random shifts came my way after Ruth's departure. Banter or laughter with workmates was non-existent during the long twelve-hour shifts, as shift handover was the only time we ever saw each other. The client, family and medical professionals who dropped in became my only contacts.

This made the relationships even more personal, but also gave me time to sometimes read, write, continue my meditation practice, or do some yoga. Many of the carers went crazy with too much time to themselves and it was not unusual to arrive at a house and find the television on before breakfast. Grateful that I loved my own company, the long hours of silence suited me quite well. Even if there were people around, with a dying person in the home it was usually a peaceful environment.

Walking into Stella's home in the tree-lined suburb, this was definitely the case. It wasn't just that she was dying. These were peaceful, gentle people. Stella had long, straight, white hair. Graceful was the first word that came to mind when we met, despite the fact she was lying ill in bed. Her husband George was a beautiful man and welcomed me naturally.

Having to accept that a family member is dying creates a life-changing time in itself. By the time that person reaches the stage

of needing 24-hour care, everything about the life people have known has disappeared. Their privacy and the special moments of just the two of them in the home are gone forever.

Carers came and went, changing shifts morning and night. Some were regular but some only came once, in between their own regular clients. So there were new faces to deal with, new personalities and varying work ethics. Before long, I became the regular day carer for Stella. A community nurse would also visit, as would the palliative doctor. He was a man I saw briefly with many clients over the following years and he proved to be a special, delightful and kind-hearted person.

After the experience with Ruth, my employer said I had handled it beautifully and offered me more training in palliative care, if I wanted to go down that road. I felt life was calling me in that direction, so I accepted the offer. The time and learning with Ruth had had a profound effect on me, leaving a desire to grow and experience more in that field.

My training involved two workshops. One showed me and other carers how to wash our hands properly. The other was a very brief display in lifting procedures. That was it—the full extent of my formal training. Sending me off to work with Stella, my employer told me not to tell them I had only ever had one palliative client. She believed I could do the job, as did I.

Honesty had always been a significant part of my personality. But when questions came from the family about my experience, I found myself lying, all because I needed the work. New laws were also coming in about staff qualifications, of which I had none. Even though I couldn't prove my skills by speaking about previous experiences, I wanted Stella's family to feel at ease with

me. I knew in my heart I could do the job well, as it was about gentleness and intuition more than anything. So I went along with the lies, saying I had nursed more people than I had when they asked. Lying felt so uncomfortable; I could never do it again with future clients.

Stella was very much into hygiene and wanted clean sheets on the bed every day. She was also a lady of style and insisted on wearing a nightdress to match the colour or pattern of the sheets. George laughed with me one day, when he found himself in trouble for choosing the wrong sheets for the nightdress she wanted to wear. Laughing, I replied, 'Whatever makes her happy.'

And so it was that this tall, graceful woman lay dying in her choice of sheets and nightdress, when she asked me about my life. 'Do you meditate?' she asked.

'Yes I do,' I happily replied. It was not a question I had expected.

Stella continued. 'What path do you follow?' I told her and she nodded in understanding.

'Do you do yoga?' she asked.

'Yes I do,' I again replied, 'but not as much as I'd like to.'

'Do you meditate daily?'

'Yes. Twice a day.'

After a moment she replied with a sigh and a gentle voice, 'Oh thank God. I have been waiting for you for ages. I can die now.'

Stella had been a yoga instructor for forty years, long before yoga had become an everyday thing in Western culture. Back then it was something strange from the East. She had been to India several times and was very devoted to her path.

Originally, because it was too out there for the world they lived in, Stella had said she was an exercise instructor when asked,

rather than a yoga teacher. As society thankfully evolved over time and yoga became more mainstream, she came out of her shell and taught many students the art and wisdom of this path.

Her husband was a retired professional who still did a little work from home. He pottered about peacefully and I enjoyed his presence. The home library was full of spiritual classics. Many I had read, many I had wanted to but hadn't as yet. It was a reader's dream come true, particularly for one so interested in philosophy, psychology and spirituality. I devoured as many as possible. Stella would stir from her sleep, ask what book I was reading, where I was up to in the book, and pass comment on it. She knew them all. When she was alert enough for long conversations, which wasn't often enough, it was always about philosophy. We shared many theories and found our thinking not so terribly different from one other.

My yoga practice also improved greatly. I didn't feel I had to hide what I was doing, or go off into another room. The door to Stella's bedroom was never closed, so fresh air blew through unhindered. It was a lovely space to work in. Stella's peaceful white cat, Yogi, would lie on the end of her bed and watch me. As the afternoons in the neighbourhood were particularly peaceful, I mostly used that time to stretch and breathe. Thinking Stella was asleep, I would be delighted when she would pass comment on something I was doing—how to improve a posture or try another similar one, perhaps more dynamic and challenging—before she dozed off again.

At the time, I had been doing yoga for about five years. It had begun in Fremantle, a suburb of Perth, while I was living in Western Australia. Twice a week I would jump on my pushbike

and ride down to Fremantle from a couple of suburbs away. Kale was the teacher. He truly was a wonderful introduction to yoga for me. He hadn't found his own way to it until late in life, when a back injury drew him to it. Obviously life had big plans for him and he did find his calling, much to the benefit of his many devoted students.

When we left Perth, life became unsettled for some time, but yoga continued to call. Wherever I was living, I would search for a new class and sometimes join one briefly. But finding a class I could connect with as much as I had with Kale's was a search in vain. It was not to be found.

During my time in Stella's bedroom, I came to see how I hadn't truly connected with my practice, as I was still looking to the teacher for the connection, rather than myself. Thanks to Stella's guidance, this changed permanently. I have enjoyed other classes since, as they push me a bit further than may happen in my home practice. They are also a great way to meet up with like-minded people. But my home practice doesn't waiver now, as the practice itself is the teacher. Stella had made her mark on her final student.

Stella's biggest frustration was that she was ready to die and it wasn't happening. I would arrive of a morning and ask how she was feeling. 'Well, how do you think I am feeling?' she would reply. 'I am still here and I don't want to be.'

She was also unable to meditate anymore. After all of Stella's years of mental discipline and the connection she had experienced with herself through meditation, she thought it would be a natural thing now as she approached her return home. In fact, she thought her practice would intensify. But it was my practice that did. Every afternoon when she drifted off again, I would do my afternoon sit.

'You're so lucky,' she would say to me later. 'This is so frustrating. I can't meditate and I can't die.'

'Perhaps you are still here for me. Perhaps there are still things that I need to learn through you and that is why your time has not yet come,' I suggested.

She nodded. 'I can accept that.'

However, as is always the case when any two people interact, we were there to learn through each other. When I broached the subject of surrender, Stella began to find more peace within. As I sat beside her bed and spoke of days gone by, of learning to let go, she listened with interest.

Over the years, I had lived from one leap of faith to the next. I told her how I had hit the road south years earlier, with nothing but a full tank of fuel, fifty dollars, and an intention to move somewhere cooler for a while. With a town on the far south coast of New South Wales in mind, I headed in that general direction. Visiting friends along the way, I found a couple of day's work, which allowed me to continue the trip. Having already been so nomadic, I had friends dotted all over the place and it was wonderful to see them again, some I'd not seen for almost a decade. I eventually arrived in the town intended, but with little money.

A caravan park on the headland had the best view in town, overlooking the mighty Pacific Ocean. I stopped there for a night. The back seat of my old jeep had been removed and replaced with a mattress. Curtains went up before I'd hit the road and there it was, I was mobile. Checking out the work opportunities in the town, things looked a bit challenging initially. But it was autumn, my favourite time of year. So I just savoured the perfect weather for a few days and did a lot of walking.

Paying for my site at the caravan park was not going to be possible on an ongoing basis. My money was running out and I was really only there for a shower and a base, while making contacts. So I bought some food and headed into the bush, following signs to an inland river not far away. Having lived by leaps of faith before, I knew I would have to face my fears head-on yet again. If I was going to will something to me through faith alone, I had to get my head out of the way and that is always the hardest thing.

Unhealthy patterns surfaced in my mind, as a result of past conditioning and society telling me I couldn't live this way. Fear started rearing its ugly head, as I wondered how on earth it was all going to come together, yet again. Bringing myself back to the present moment was the only thing that had saved me before, and was the only thing that would save me now. And there is no better place to face your fears than in nature, where you can get back into the true rhythm of life.

When fears were sleeping, I enjoyed wonderful days in a healthy, uncomplicated routine of eating simple, wholesome food, swimming in the cleansing, crystal-clear river, watching the faces of curious wildlife come and go, listening to birds with a variety of songs and reading. It was a reverent time, spacious and beautiful.

Almost two weeks went by before I saw any other people. The day I did was pleasant. It was a family of three generations, out at the river for a picnic lunch. This told me it was probably the weekend. I left my jeep open and went for a big bushwalk, leaving them the place to enjoy. In the late afternoon I lay in the back of the jeep, still with the back and windows wide open, and read for a while. The beautiful light of dusk filtered magically through the trees.

As the family were leaving, a woman my age, the mother of the two children, broke away from the group. Her husband, parents and children continued to their car. She walked over to me quietly and lent inside my jeep. I looked up from my book a little startled and smiled, as she simply whispered 'I envy your freedom'. With that we both laughed and she left without another word, and with no time for me to reply.

Lying in the jeep that night, the curtains open, frogs singing by the river and a blanket of a million stars keeping me company, I smiled thinking of her. She was right. I was as free as they come. I didn't have enough money or food beyond the next few days, but right at that moment, I was as free as a person could be.

People have often asked me since about the various trips I did to the bush and other places in the country, and whether I was ever scared for my safety. The answer has been that I rarely had reason to be. There were a couple of potentially uncertain situations, like the hitchhiking thing, but I came out okay and put those rare occasions down to good learning. As every move was done intuitively, I tried my best to always move forward with trust, knowing I would be looked after.

We are mostly social creatures though, so I headed into town again. I phoned my mother, with whom I have a healthy and loving relationship. Being a mother, she was always a little concerned for my welfare, while another part of her understood that nomadic life was a part of me. She didn't judge my choices, but was always relieved to hear from me. The day before she had spent two dollars on a lottery ticket, with the intention of winning me some money, and had done so. She is such a naturally generous person that life blessed her.

'You give to me in so many other ways,' she said. 'I insist you take this money. It was with the intention of helping you that it came to me anyway.' So I gratefully found myself with money to get through another couple of weeks.

Waking up in my jeep at the caravan park the next morning, I headed down to the rocks to watch the sunrise over the ocean. I love that first glimpse of light, when there are still stars out but a whole new day is coming. As the sky turned pink then orange, I sat on the rocks watching a pod of playful dolphins swimming by, flipping themselves out of the water for pure delight. I knew then that everything was going to turn out just fine.

After a long and enjoyable chat about life and travel later in the day with the owner of the park, he returned to my jeep dangling a key. 'I don't need van number eight for another ten days. It is yours and I will not allow you to pay one cent for it. If my daughter was sleeping in the back of her car, I would hope someone would do the same for her,' Ted declared.

'Bless you Ted, thank you' I said, fighting back tears of gratitude.

So I had a roof over my head for the next ten nights and somewhere to cook. During this time though, fears were starting to rage fiercely in me again about my situation. I had to earn some money. My food supply was again diminishing. Each day, I visited all of the businesses in town and while I met plenty of fine people, no work was forthcoming. Walking back up the hill to the headland and caravan, I took a deep breath, trying to stay present, but trying to find a solution too.

I hated this part of my life, this compulsion to always throw caution to the wind and create such challenging situations for myself, time and time again. Yet it was also addictive. Each time

I did this, I challenged my fears head-on and somehow I always, always landed on my feet again. In some ways each leap of faith became harder, as it brought me closer to the core of my deepest fears. Yet each leap also became easier. I had tested my faith to the limit on numerous occasions previously and had gained wisdom and a stronger faith in myself through the process. Life also made more sense to me this way, regardless of how hard it was at times. I just didn't fit in with the way conventional society works.

It was at that point, as I watched the high tide wash back out, that I remembered the importance of surrender, of letting go and allowing nature to weave its magic. The same force that balances the flow of the tides, the force that sees seasons come and go and creates life, was surely capable of bringing the opportunity to me I needed. I had to let go first. Trying to control the timing and outcome was a terrible waste of energy. My intentions were already out there and I had taken what action I could. My only job now was to get out of the way.

I laughed gently at myself, remembering I had forgotten this. It was a lesson from previous times. When I was out on the very end of a thin, flimsy, bending limb, the only thing to do was surrender and see where I landed. It was time to let go again.

Surrender is not giving up, far from it. Surrender takes an enormous amount of courage. Often we are only capable of doing so when the pain of trying to control the outcome becomes too much to bear. Reaching that point is actually liberating, even if it is not fun. Being able to accept that there is absolutely nothing more you can do, other than hand it over to the greater force, is the catalyst that finally opens the flow.

The next morning I headed down the rocks to the water, where dolphins at play greeted me again at sunrise. I was feeling completely empty and drained after the onslaught of fear, pain, and resistance that finally led to surrendering. Emotional exhaustion had worn me out. But while watching the dolphins, I absorbed the new dawn and slowly, gently, allowed myself to be refuelled by hope.

In casual conversation with some people on holidays in the caravan park a few days later, a job was offered to me in Melbourne, another seven or so hours south. 'Why not?' I thought. I was free to go anywhere and had wanted to live in a cooler climate. Melbourne soon became my favourite Australian city and remains so. But I hadn't considered moving there at the time and had no idea how much I would benefit from living in such a creative city. It was only through surrendering and staying present that I could allow the job opportunity to flow my way.

As I finished telling my story to Stella, we both smiled. She ate her half a strawberry, agreeing without ego. She had been trying to control the moment of her passing. It was time to surrender that control and as much as she didn't particularly like the idea, she accepted it might still be some time before her day came. It takes the body nine months to form. Sometimes it takes a little while for it to close down too.

By now, Stella was very weak and almost off her food entirely. There was no energy to eat but she accepted small pieces of fruit, simply to taste things. The day before, it had been two grapes. Today it was half a strawberry.

Her illness should have seen her in a lot of pain, especially considering how far along it had progressed before she was

diagnosed. Yet there was very little pain, which amazed her doctor. As it spread, it was mostly exhaustion she experienced. All of the work she had done on her spiritual journey gave her a very strong connection with her body, now blessing her by being almost pain free. It also allowed her a smooth departure when the time came.

Two or three days previously, I had noticed her fingers had swollen to the point where her wedding ring was now causing deep indentations to her finger. It looked like it was affecting circulation there. Phoning my employer, I was advised by the nurse that the ring had to come off. With George lying on the bed beside her, I worked on the finger with water and soap, gently removing it. It took a long time and by then, both Stella and George were crying. I felt like the devil incarnate, except that by the time I had succeeded in removing this symbol of their love that had been there for more than half a century, I was crying too.

Always such a dear man, George called her by a special, affectionate name that had been a part of their married life for so long. I left the room while they shared a rare moment of private closeness, lying in each other's arms for perhaps the last time ever. As I stood in the bathroom crying, I felt blessed to witness the depth of love between them. It was unlike any I had seen previously. They were true friends and both gentle, considerate people with everyone, and especially with each other.

Their son and daughters visited regularly and there were many more visits now, as time was drawing close. I liked them all. They were all very different, but each of them was a decent, lovely person. I had grown especially close to one of the daughters.

A cool change came along unexpectedly one day and I found myself at work without enough layers. George insisted I put on

one of Stella's cardigans. Both he and Stella agreed how much it suited me. It was one of those things you wouldn't normally notice in a shop if it wasn't your style, but when you put it on, you fell in love with it instantly. On this day the family, including Stella, gave me the cardigan to keep. Years later I still wear it.

That night, Stella fell into a coma when I was at home sleeping. I returned the next morning to find a solemn house. George and their son David were there. As the soft breeze blew in through the bedroom door, George lay on the bed beside his beautiful wife. His hand held hers, which was now getting cold. Stella was still alive but in these cases, as death gets closer, circulation is affected in the extremities. Her feet had also lost their warmth. David sat on a chair holding her other hand. I sat on a chair further down the bed, my hand on her foot. I guess I just needed to touch her too.

After more than twelve hours of being in a deep coma, Stella opened her eyes and smiled at something towards the ceiling. George sat up. 'She's smiling,' he declared startled. 'She's smiling at something.'

Stella had no awareness of us anymore, but the smile she gave to whomever or whatever she was looking at, cemented something in me that has never wavered. Having had meditations previously that took me to blissful places well beyond the usual human plane, I had never doubted an afterlife. Looking at Stella's amazing happiness as she smiled to the ceiling with her eyes open, I knew with total conviction that nothing would ever sway me from this belief. There is something more to go to, or return to.

After she smiled, Stella let out a small sigh, her eyes rolled back and all was quiet. George and David looked to me for confirmation. Having only experienced Ruth's passing before now I waited for

the big breath, which was not forthcoming. 'Is she dead? Is she dead?' they asked in despair and heartbroken sorrow.

I tried to find the pulse in her neck but my own heart was beating so hard, I could only feel its rhythm. I was under immense pressure and had no idea what I was doing. They looked at me desperately. I didn't want to declare she had died then find her living for another day or two, or even just taking one more big breath. So I prayed for guidance.

A calm came over me as I looked at her, then I knew she had left. It had been such a smooth, graceful and gentle departure I hadn't been able to tell. But this wave of love now sweeping through me confirmed she had gone. I nodded, and then George and David left the room immediately. The most heartbreaking sob echoed through the house, as George acknowledged his beloved wife was gone. I sat in silence with Stella, as my own tears fell.

A couple of hours later, with the rest of the family there and practical details attended to, we said our goodbyes to each other. The morning had now warmed into a very hot day and I was contemplating what to do with myself, really just wanting a superficial distraction. Still driving the same jeep after all of those miles of travelling, I had to slam the driver's door to get it to close properly. It had been like that for some time. As I did so on this day, the whole driver's side window shattered and fell inside the door panel. I sat there staring at it, already numb from the morning's events and now even more upset, due to the huge bang that came with the shattering. I looked out of the window, free of glass except for a few fragments, and accepted that perhaps the best thing for me to do was just go home.

It took three days for the replacement window to arrive. So I spent those days at home and down by the harbour. I thanked Stella constantly during that time for sending me home. It was the best thing, allowing me to simply be. A couple of months later, I received a letter from Stella's daughter, Therese, who I had grown close to. The day after Stella had passed, Therese was walking down the street, naturally thinking of her mum. A huge white cockatoo flew right down in front of her, so close she could feel the wind from its wings. Stella was that sort of woman, capable of sending us signs, and I delighted in reading Therese's letter.

A year or so went by before I visited the family for dinner. I was looking forward to the night, especially to see darling George again and find out how he was getting on. Therese and her husband came along too. The evening started out well and it was lovely to hear how George was becoming quite social, playing bridge and other things. Then somehow the dinner conversation ended up back in the 'lie' department. Therese was asking questions about how different her mum's passing had been to all of my previous clients, or something along those lines. That was my big chance to come clean and tell them how I had been so inexperienced when caring for Stella.

I really don't think they would have minded by then, as they were more than happy with the service they had received. But I couldn't come clean; George was just so delighted to have me there and kept making a point of how beautiful it was for us all to be together again. I wanted to get Therese alone that night and tell her the full story, but had no chance.

We lost touch soon after that night as life moved on. Some years later though, we all reconnected and I was given the chance

to tell the family of my inexperience, and of my regret in not being straight with them from the start. They were beautifully accepting and forgiving about it, saying I more than made up for it with empathy and compassion. They had felt from the start that I was the right person to care for their mother. It was lovely to reconnect and remember what we had all shared together. Every winter, I still wear my cardigan and I think of Stella. Last winter I was wearing it as I re-read a book she had given me, pausing and smiling at my own memories. This work sure introduced me to some beautiful people.

Either way though, the lying thing was a great lesson. After my time with Stella, I decided I would never lie to clients again. I was an honest person and regardless of how difficult honesty may be to deliver, it was the only path I would ever walk comfortably.

Learning from what happened then allowed me to forgive myself, and that is the greatest forgiveness of all.

REGRET 1:

I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me

It took no time at all for Grace to become one of my favourite palliative clients. She was a tiny woman with a huge heart. This flowed on to her children, all of whom were parents themselves and equally delightful people.

Grace lived in a different part of the city, unusual for our clients. It was a suburban street like so many others, with no mansions looming on either side. My first impression was that it would be a good street for a television series. It oozed with family energy. The thing I most liked about Grace and her family was that they were very down-to-earth and genuinely welcoming.

The early days with her began as usually happened—sharing stories to get to know each other. Familiar comments were also heard in the bathroom about the loss of dignity Grace was experiencing, with someone else having to wipe her bum, and how a nice young thing like me shouldn't have to do such an awful job. I became used to that part of my work and tried to lighten up the situation by making no fuss of it. Being sick is certainly one

way to dissolve the ego. Dignity disappears into the past forever when you are terminally ill. Acceptance of the situation and of someone else wiping your backside becomes inevitable, as clients become too sick to worry about such things after a while.

Married for more than fifty years, Grace had led the life expected of her. She had raised lovely children and now rejoiced in the lives of her grandchildren as they lived through their teenage years. Her husband had apparently been a bit of a tyrant though, making married life for Grace very unpleasant for decades. It was a relief for everyone, especially Grace, when he had been admitted into a nursing home permanently, just a few months before.

Grace had spent her married life dreaming of living independently from her husband, of travelling, not living under his dictatorship, and mostly just living a simple, happy life. Although she was in her eighties, she had still been fit and healthy for her age. Good health gives such freedom of mobility and this had been the case for her when her husband was admitted into the nursing home.

Within a short time of her new-found and long-awaited freedom, Grace began to feel very ill. A few days after this turning point, she was diagnosed with terminal illness, already quite advanced. What made this even more heartbreaking was that her illness was caused by her husband's long-term smoking habit within the home. The illness was aggressive and by the time a month had passed, Grace had lost all of her strength and was bedridden, only able to hobble slowly to the bathroom with a walking frame while assisted. The dreams she had waited all of her life to live were never going to happen. It was too late.

The anguish she suffered over this was ongoing, tormenting her enormously.

'Why didn't I just do what I wanted? Why did I let him rule me? Why wasn't I strong enough?' were questions I heard repeatedly. She was so angry with herself for not having found the courage. Her children confirmed the hard life she had experienced and their hearts went out to her, as did mine.

'Don't you ever let anyone stop you doing what you want, Bronnie,' she said. 'Promise that to this dying woman, please.' I promised, and went on to explain how I was fortunate to have an amazing mother who had taught me independence by example.

'Look at me now,' Grace continued. 'Dying. Dying! How can it be possible I have waited all of these years to be free and independent and now it's too late?' There was no denying this was tragic—and a memory that would accompany me into the future, constantly reminding me to live my own way.

Grace's decline was happening quite fast. Despite this, we shared hours of conversations over those first weeks. Sitting in her bedroom, dotted with sentimental artefacts and photos of her family, Grace explained that she wasn't against marriage, not at all. She thought it could be a beautiful thing and a great opportunity to grow, through shared learning. What she was against was the doctrine of her generation: that you had to stay in a marriage regardless of anything. And so she had, all the while forfeiting her own happiness. She had dedicated her life to her husband, who had taken her love for granted.

Now that she was dying, she didn't care what people thought of her and anguished over why she hadn't worked this out sooner. Grace had kept up appearances and lived the way others expected

her to, only now realising the choice to do so had always been her own and was based on fear. Although I offered support, including the need to forgive herself, the fact that it was now all too late continued to overwhelm her.

Most of my assignments were one on one like this—longer-term clients who I would care for until they passed. There came to be many others dotted in between these over the years too, clients who I would see just a few times in between their own regular carers. Those words from Grace, filled with anguish, despair and frustration, were echoed by several others I also came to meet. Of all of the regrets and lessons shared with me as I sat beside their beds, *the regret of not having lived a life true to themselves* was the most common of all. It was also the one that caused the most frustration, as the client's realisation came too late.

'It's not like I wanted to live a grand life,' Grace explained in one of many conversations from her bed. 'I am a good person and I didn't wish to harm anyone.' Grace was one of the sweetest people I have ever met and wouldn't have been capable of harming anyone anyway. It just wasn't in her. 'But I wanted to do things for me too and I just didn't have the courage.'

Grace now understood that it would have been better for everyone had she been brave enough to honour this desire. 'Well, everyone except for my husband,' she said with disgust towards herself. 'I would have been happier and would not have let this misery permeate our family for decades. Why did I put up with him? Why, Bronnie, why?' Her heartbreaking sobs burst out and continued to flow as I held her close.

When her tears subsided, she looked at me with fierce determination. 'I mean it. Promise this dying woman that you

will always be true to yourself, that you will be brave enough to live the way you want to, regardless of what other people say.' The lace curtains blew softly, allowing the day outside to enter the bedroom, as we looked at each other with love, clarity, and determination.

'I promise, Grace. I am already trying to, but I promise you now that I will always continue to do so,' I replied with heartfelt truth. Holding my hand she smiled knowing that at least her learning wasn't going to be totally wasted. When I explained to Grace that for over a decade of my adult life I had worked in unsatisfying banking, administration and management roles, she started to understand me more and listened with great interest. Further years in banking had been added to this tally later, when I returned from overseas. But I called those my weaning years, weaning myself out of the industry.

The first couple of years out of school were fun. There were many trainees and work was a social thing above all else. All of the trainees were seventeen or eighteen years old, so work was really just about catching up with friends and earning money to fund our weekends. The work itself was very easy for me at first and may have stayed that way, if my heart had been in the job. It never was though. After those early years, I quickly became restless and began questioning life. Yet I carried on with the life expected of me for a decade more, the whole time knowing there was something else waiting but not having the courage to seek it.

One thing that kept me there was the fear of ridicule I would face from some family members, if I broke out of the mould they expected me to fit into. I was living someone else's life through my shoes and it was never going to work. Yet I carried on, regularly

changing bank jobs, uniforms and locations. As a result, I found myself on an accelerated career path, due to having worked for most of the banks and in more roles than a normal person my age would have. I was a success by default.

Desperately unhappy, I continued to give my working week to an industry that did nothing for my soul. There are plenty of people who love their jobs in banking and I am happy for them. Banking needs such people. These days, there are opportunities to work in areas where you are giving back to the community as well as other noble avenues. But like Grace, I had been living the life others expected of me, not the life I wanted to.

As I could do no right with some of my family and was struggling to be who they wanted me to be, staying in a 'good job' at least kept them off my back in that area of my life. I was trapped by fear and the potential pain that would be created by setting myself up for even more judgement than I had already endured.

Being the black sheep in any family is never easy. Black sheep have a different role to play in family dynamics, but it is rarely a comfortable one. When some of the main players in the unit gain their power by reducing the strength of others, it is a hard road upwards. Working among so many families in my line of work, I came to observe that very few families are free of conflict on some level. Every family has its learning, every one of them. Mine was no different, though this realisation didn't necessarily ease my pain at the time.

Making jokes at my expense had been a family sport for as long as I could remember. I was a swimmer among a family of horse riders, a vegetarian from a sheep farming family, a nomad in

a family of settlers, and on it went. Often things were said in jest and the person speaking may not have realised the pain they were causing at the time, but jokes tend to wear thin after a few decades of hearing them. Too often, things said *were* intentional and just downright cruel. Even if you had the strength of a thousand, it does eventually wear you down. Particularly when you have trouble recalling a single period of your life when being ridiculed, yelled at, or told you were hopeless wasn't happening.

Consequently, up until this time I had never particularly enjoyed family dynamics. So the easiest way to handle it had been to just to keep living the life expected of me. Eventually I began to withdraw and close down around them. This was my coping mechanism.

Also, artists the world over are misunderstood, and I was an artist. I just hadn't realised it at that time. All I knew was that selling insurance products to people just wanting to bank their pay cheques was really not up my alley. The branch sales at the end of the month held absolutely no relevance to me. I didn't care about anything except giving the customers friendly, warm service, which I did very well. But that was not enough in the changing face of the banking industry. It was all sell, sell, sell.

It is human nature to find the strength needed to avoid further pain, long before we actually bless ourselves with pleasure. In other words, the longing to avoid pain is stronger than the yearning for pleasure. So it is often only when the pain becomes too much that we finally find the courage to make changes.

Until then, the pain within me just continued to fester until it reached breaking point. When I left yet another 'good job' to go and live on the island, confusion reigned. 'Why would she do

that? Where is she going to this time?' And through it all, I was just thinking with excitement, 'I'm going to live on an island!' The further away, the happier I was. My life was my own there and it was a good life. Any contact I did have with the mainland was to my mother, who was my rock.

It was during those years on the island that I first dabbled in meditation. Later, I found my way to the path that would offer me the opportunity to connect with my own goodness in ways no other had. Through this path, Vipassana meditation, I began to understand and experience compassion. It is such a beautiful and powerful force.

The pain I had accepted from others had been their own suffering projected onto me. Happy people don't treat other people that way, nor do they judge others for living a life true to his or her self. If anything, they respect it. Recognising the pain carried into my generation from previous ones, I had the choice to break free of it in my own life. I was never going to be able to control another and had no desire to. People change because they want to and when they are ready.

Learning to view life compassionately, and accept that I may never have the understanding or loving relationships I had once yearned for, was liberating. It transformed my life on so many levels. Knowing the ongoing pain of my own healing, I accepted that not everyone has the courage to face his or her past, at least not until it becomes unbearable.

To a degree, the same dynamics persisted for some years after, but affected me less and less. It took strength and time, but I came to see that it was not about me. It was about whoever was trying to give me their criticism or judgement.

A Buddhist story goes that a man came shouting angrily at Buddha, who remained unaffected by him. When questioned by others as to how he remained calm and unaffected, Buddha answered with a question. 'If someone gives you a gift and you choose not to receive it, to whom then does the gift belong?' Of course it stays with the giver. And so it was with words that continued to be unjustly dumped onto me at times. I stopped taking them on and felt compassion instead. Those words were not coming from a place of happiness.

The most important thing I have learnt in life though, the absolutely most important, is that *compassion starts with yourself.* Developing compassion for others allowed the healing to begin and continue. It removed me from the equation somewhat when the old behavioural patterns still tried to reign. I could recognise the suffering and see that it wasn't about me at all. It was someone else's own pain coming up and out. This didn't just apply to family relationships. It was relevant to all relationships: personal, public and professional. We all suffer at some time. We all have pain, every one of us.

Learning how to develop compassion for myself, though, was much harder. I didn't realise at the time, but it was going to take years. Learning to give myself loving kindness and acknowledge that I too had suffered enormously was such a difficult change to make. It was *almost easier* to listen to unfair opinions from others and take them on board, as that was so familiar. It may not have brought happiness, but learning to be kind to myself and give myself compassion above everything else was certainly a process I had to grow into. The healing had at least begun.

With this new intention of self-love, self-respect and self-compassion, the old family dynamics started losing power. I found the strength to speak back, allowing myself to finally be heard, rather than continuing to withdraw. Of course, this was my own pain now being expressed and not really about the people I addressed at all. We all interpret things that happen to us in our own way. So it was about me expressing and releasing my own suffering. Breaking the patterns of decades took a lot of guts, but my pain gave me that. I had nothing to lose anymore. I couldn't carry the pain of silence any longer.

It was really only the desire to be loved, accepted and understood by each other that truly fuelled the pain in us all. Compassion was the only way forward—compassion and patience. In spite of everything, love still existed between us, in its own fragile disguise.

It was as if I had been swimming down the same river over and over, and each time I would come across a large rock blocking my natural flow. It was always there. One day though, I realised that it may *always* be there. Rather than repeatedly having to face that same rock, that same blockage, I was choosing somewhere different to swim, somewhere that would allow me to move forwards freely and naturally. I didn't have to set myself up for that hurdle over and over, one that hindered my natural progress and caused blockages and pain every time without fail.

It was time to do things differently. It was time to choose a different way, to speak up and say 'enough'. I wasn't willing to tolerate the same patterns anymore. Even if it turned out lonelier for me, at least it could lead to peace. The other path certainly wouldn't.

After speaking up, things started to change within me. I grew stronger in self-respect and clearer in self-expression. Some new and healthier seeds had finally been sown. I didn't yet know how to nurture them, but at least they were planted. It was time to start living as the person I wanted to be, one small step at a time.

After sharing all of this with Grace, we naturally grew closer. She agreed that all families have their learning to do. She couldn't think of one family who hadn't had its challenges, and believed that families bring about the greatest gifts of learning for most people. We discussed how the only way to experience love is to accept people for who they are and have no expectations of them. While it may be much easier said than done, it was the most loving approach possible.

Grace shared many stories with me, reflecting on her life, her children growing up, the neighbourhood changing, then often back to her dying regret. She wished she'd had the courage to live a life true to her own heart, not the life others expected of her. When there is limited time left, there is little to lose by being totally honest. What we shared with each other was straight to the core of important things. There was no idle chatter anymore. All of the subjects covered were deeply personal. Opening up to Grace was unexpectedly very healing for me and my listening ear became healing for her.

Eventually we also came to the subject of where my life was now, my musical directions, and how I had started to write songs and perform. Over a cup of tea, Grace insisted I bring my guitar to work the next day and play her something, which was an absolute pleasure for me. With a heart full of happiness, I sang to Grace as she smiled and hummed, sitting up in her bed. She embraced

every song I shared, receiving them as if each one was the best song in the world. Her family came to hear some of them too and they were equally supportive. Grace absolutely loved one song in particular, as she had always wanted to travel. It was called *Beneath Australian Skies*.

After that day, Grace would ask me to sing to her regularly. There was no need for a guitar, she said. So I'd sit there in her bedroom, singing to this delightful little lady as she closed her eyes, smiling and absorbing everything. Songs were requested over and over, particularly the one about Australia, and I never tired of singing to her.

Each day Grace's health deteriorated. Her tiny size reduced even more. Old friends came to say their goodbyes. Relatives sat by her bed, chatting and fighting back their tears. Her family was a hands-on one, very involved with regular visits. I liked that. There was also gentleness in them that I was drawn to. When they were all gone and it was just Grace and me, the request for more singing resurfaced. They were special times.

Walking was now difficult and though Grace had accepted the use of a commode by the bed, she refused when it came to her bowel movements. She wanted to use a proper toilet, so I didn't have to clean the commode. There was no budging her on this, even when I tried to assure Grace it was no big deal for me. So, ages passed as we made our way to the bathroom, which thankfully was next to her bedroom. She was very weak. When the business was done and she was clean, I assisted her to stand then pulled her underpants back up. Balancing her while doing the undies thing had to be quite a swift move.

We then started our hike back to the bedroom, with Grace leaning on her walking frame and me following, holding her hips. I noticed that in the rush I had tucked a little of her nightdress into the back of her underpants. Smiling at this dear little woman in her last days, tottering back to bed, I was overwhelmed with joy as she started to sing *Beneath Australian Skies* as she walked. A few of the words were in the wrong places, but that just made the moment even more endearing.

I knew then that I had just experienced the high point of my musical career. Nothing would ever happen again that could top the joy I experienced at that moment. To have brought this dear person so much pleasure through my music, and to then receive that pleasure back by hearing her singing my song in her final days, warmed my heart more than anything I had ever hoped for musically.

Arriving at work a couple of days later, it was obvious that it was to be the last for Grace. Explaining that I was going to call her family, she initially shook her head. Weak and exhausted, she reached up and hugged me. To save her little arms the effort, I lay on the bed and held her in my own. She liked that and we lay talking softly for a while, as her fingers stroked my arm. Asking why she didn't want the family there, she said she didn't want to cause them any more pain. She loved them too much.

They needed to say goodbye, I said. Not giving them that choice might end up causing them pain and guilt that they would have to live with forever. Grace understood and agreed, accepting that she didn't want them to feel guilty for not being there. Phone calls were made and the family soon arrived; but just before they

did, she said to me through her exhaustion, 'You remember our promise, Bronnie, don't you?'

Nodding through my tears I said, 'Yes.'

'Live true to your own heart, darling. Don't ever worry what others think. Promise me, Bronnie,' her voice now a barely audible whisper.

'I promise you, Grace,' I said gently. Squeezing my hand she drifted off to sleep, waking again only for brief moments to acknowledge her lovely family who then sat by her bedside until the end. Within a few hours, Grace drifted off. Her time had come. Sitting quietly in the kitchen afterwards, my promise to her was still fresh in my ears. It was not just Grace I had made the promise to. It was also to myself.

Standing on stage launching my album a few months later, I dedicated that song to her. Grace's family was in the audience. The spotlight blacked out most of the faces, but I didn't need to see them. I could feel the love they were sharing. As I sang, I remembered that dear little woman who hadn't lived as she wanted, but who had definitely inspired me to.

Products of our environment

Anthony was only in his late thirties when we met one Saturday afternoon. He had dark-blonde curly hair and despite being ill, a natural look of mischief emanated from him. It was a big change to be caring for someone younger. Striking up a friendship was a breeze and despite the circumstances, we enjoyed an element of humour from the start.

With a younger brother, four younger sisters, and a high-profile family in the business world, he had been completely indulged throughout his life. Whatever Anthony wanted was his and he used it to his advantage as a younger man. He had big shoes to fill though, due to the financial success of his family. This pressure had worked on him in reverse—despite intelligence and opportunities, he had very low self-esteem. It was masked quite well beneath humour and mischief, but Anthony felt he could not be what his family wanted. Being the oldest son in the family was a burden too heavy for his sensitive heart.

As a young adult he drove fast cars, was often chased by police, hired the most expensive working girls, and caused havoc to anyone who crossed his path. This was territorial land between the young men of the wealthy suburbs. Some of the actions Anthony had employed were hardly endearing, but due to low self-worth he lived

recklessly, challenging life to extremes. One such act left him in hospital with damaged organs and limbs, with the potential to lose his health forever.

The doctors were doing what they could to return his freedom to him, but things were not looking hopeful. Anthony was resigned to it. Realising he had probably done permanent damage, he requested that the next operation go ahead as soon as possible, so he would know either way. A couple of surgical procedures were done, then painkillers kept him sleeping as I sat beside his bed in the hospital room. For the first week or so it would be a case of wait and see, hopefully allowing for a gradual recovery.

We fell into the habit of me reading to him. It started one evening when he asked me what my book was. Having spent time living in the Middle East, I wanted to spend more time there. The book I was reading was an intelligent, unbiased look at the way of life in that region and its history. While I was not in denial about the subjugation of women in some of those countries, or the extent that some extremists from those nations go to in the name of religion (just as extremists from *any* religion lose sight of the teachings of kindness that are common in all religions), I had also seen a side to that culture that is unfortunately never portrayed in the media.

They are warm-hearted people, wonderfully family oriented, and some of the most hospitable hosts I have come across. They welcomed me without hesitation. This has also been the case with people from that region I have since come to know in Australia. We have lost so much of the family connection in the West, particularly where the older generation is concerned. I was seeing

this firsthand with the number of lonely people in nursing homes, during the random shifts I sometimes did in them.

How differently other cultures choose to live fascinates me, as do culinary delights to be discovered. Yet we are all so much alike in other ways. Racism is something I will never understand. The majority of us are the same: we just want to be happy and, on some level, we all have hearts that suffer.

Anthony was keen to hear more about the book I was reading. So after making us a pot of herbal tea, its aroma wafting gently through the room, I brought him up to date on the book so far. The reading then continued, but now out loud. We would share an hour or two like this every day, time we enjoyed immensely. As his recovery extended for several weeks, I was able to introduce Anthony to books he would never have come across otherwise. I offered him a choice of topics, but he always insisted he would be happy with whatever I read.

I introduced him to some spiritual classics, as well as others about life, philosophy and thinking outside the square. Discussion would flow on naturally afterwards, as I tended to his needs—lifting an arm that was not working, another in a plaster cast, dressing the wound on a leg that was not working, then feeding him, combing his hair and attending to other personal grooming needs.

In the end, the physical damage resulting from his actions meant the operations were not wholly successful. Some things were fixed, but some parts of him were damaged for life. He was unable to return home, requiring permanent assistance with personal care. It was decided he would go into a nursing home, one of the best in the city, at least according to the brochure and the price.

Anthony was a young man now surrounded by drab walls and dying, elderly people. It was an awful environment and I longed to take to the walls with brighter coloured paint. Initially, he was happy enough. It brought him peace, knowing that the pressure of his care had been removed from his family. He was also able to bring good cheer to the older residents and they loved him. Over time though, his light grew dull and the shortage of outside stimuli numbed his intelligence. He started to become a product of his environment.

We are all fairly malleable, bendable creatures. While we have the choice to think for ourselves and free will to live the way our hearts desire, our environment has a huge effect on us all, particularly when we start choosing life from a more conscious perspective.

One example of being influenced by the surrounding environment is watching down-to-earth and already happy people get caught up in the chase for more, more, more after a job promotion. The desire to keep up with new friends on a new level of income often sees people change to suit their environment. The suburb they were once happy living in is no longer good enough, so they move to somewhere more suitable. Sometimes this brings happiness, but not always.

Many country people also adapt to city life and become affected by fashions and busier lifestyles. Not that there isn't fashion in the country. There definitely is, but again it is a case of being influenced by where you live. Some people raised in cities adapt to country life and slow their lifestyle down, ditching their labels and finding happiness in jeans and gumboots, as they plod around

on their acreage. Wherever we are, our environment influences us enormously, if we hang around long enough.

During my mid-twenties I was having a lot of fun. The start of that decade had been terribly hard. By the time I was nineteen I was engaged to be married and had a serious life, complete with mortgage commitments. It was an unhealthy relationship for the most part, though somehow I survived that time. Looking back, I have no idea how. An excess of mental and physical abuse, psychological games, and exposure to various states of rage expressed by my partner, steadily diminished my confidence.

It all became too much around the same time as I scored a new job, not surprisingly in a bank. The team at work was fantastic and I found myself starting to enjoy life again. Having steady work allowed me to dream of a life beyond my current situation and I moved out. Before long, I transferred to the north coast with my job for a fresh start.

In no time at all, dancing and frivolity were given free licence and this became a happy, carefree time in my life. There were also a lot of drugs around. By now I knew drinking wasn't for me. Although I hadn't yet reached the point where I would give up alcohol forever, drinking was not a big part of my life. There was plenty of other stuff on offer though, and within a year I'd experimented with most of it. These were the days before synthetic drugs like ice and others I don't even know the street names of. Home-grown pot was common in my circle of friends, and when another friend gave me the opportunity to try opium, I did.

I felt I could try new things but was clear enough in myself to let most of it go after one experience. Thankfully, I never actually tested that theory with heroin. I steered well clear of that. Only one

experiment was the case with opium, magic mushrooms, LSD and cocaine, all of which I tried within that twelve-month period but never again. There was a need for recklessness after the confines of my upbringing and previous relationship. Underneath all of this, on an unconscious level, was a complete absence of self-worth.

I knew immediately that the life of excessive drug indulgence wasn't for me. While I was happy to try some things, I told myself it was more out of a desire to experience life than the need to be 'off my face'. Consciously, it didn't take me long to work out I preferred a healthier life. Unconsciously, there was still so much to be undone after decades of allowing the opinions of others to dominate my belief system. Happiness was still very dependent on external forces.

A few years later, following the island stint, I was living in England pulling beers in a village pub. Speed was around a lot. After doing a couple of lines, the local lads would come into the pub with huge dilated pupils and grind their teeth all night. Their regular routines were the same year in, year out. So when someone scored speed, it altered their realities enough to give them a different view of the same scene. It was merely boredom they were trying to escape from. Watching them on the days after, with the melancholy and exhaustion that followed, I had to wonder if the price was worth it.

There were a few occasions when my partner and I decided to join in, but it didn't take long to realise it wasn't our thing. The comedown from speed was awful and I hated myself for doing it to my body. Yet about a month or so later, I found myself experiencing a life-changing time. Again, my environment and

a lack of will and conscious choice to treat myself kindly were influencing me.

Dean was working all weekend, so I joined the ranks of the other village lads and jumped on a train to London for the night. Despite being in my late-twenties, I had never been to a rave, simply because they didn't play my sort of music. Rather than leave me at home on my own, the lads convinced me to join them, promising me the time of my life.

A previous experience on ecstasy—the only occasion I had tried it—had been okay. I'd had a silly night and survived the comedown, although definitely not enjoyably. My stomach felt awful, with my energy incredibly low for days. It had felt like enough of an experience and I had declined any further offers of it. I also lived with self-loathing afterwards, and I could do without any more of that. There were enough of those thoughts in me already. Yet here I was on the train to London, with eight mates convincing me to have an ecstasy pill.

Those in the city scene were dropping several pills every week, so what was the big deal about one little one? I don't blame the guys at all. They enjoyed that stuff and were only trying to get me to join them. The final choice was ultimately mine as the pill slid down my throat, just as the train pulled into Victoria station. It was the middle of winter and bitterly cold outside.

From the moment we walked into the club, I hated the music and wanted the night to be over. Acoustic music was always going to be my thing, much more than anything digital, though each to their own, of course. Techno music blared out through the speakers. Making a conscious choice to stop judging the situation and accept I was there until sunrise, I loosened up and joined the

lads on the dance floor. While they were having a blast, I was merely enduring it.

Then the pill kicked in with full intensity. I had to get out of the crowd. Sweat poured off me. Every bump of anyone's body on the dance floor made me claustrophobic. I stumbled around trying to find some space. The bass thumped through the floorboards and through my body. Smiling faces from the lads who were dancing nearby blurred into someone else. I was losing control fast and had to get to a safe place.

Noise, laughing faces and lighting became increasingly distorted, as I made my way in a desperate haze to the women's toilets. After contemplating keeping a cubicle to myself for the whole night, I reluctantly surrendered the private space, when girls started knocking on the door to see if anyone was in there.

It was too cold to go outside the club and the first train home wasn't until 6.00am. The noise of the ladies toilets and the laughter of people coming and going left me in a swirling daze. Then I spotted the window ledge. My haven, I decided. I climbed onto the sink and manoeuvred my way onto the ledge, plenty wide enough for me to sit on without any risk of slipping off. Sliding across, I found a nice little corner out of the way, overlooking the sinks in the ladies room. Busyness and chaos were below, but I could rest my back and head against the window while trying to find some peace.

Sweat continued to pour from me. The icy window I was leaning against brought much-needed reprieve. I was in my own world and could possibly handle things better. My poor heart was beating much faster than normal and I prayed it would survive the night. It didn't slow down, yet it didn't cross my mind to

ask for medical help. Maybe it was a subconscious fear of the law and illegal drugs. I don't know. Sitting with my head resting back against that icy cold window was what I felt I most needed.

'Are you alright, love?' an English girl asked me, tugging at the hem of my jeans, which were at eye level to her.

I vaguely heard her but sat open-mouthed, head resting back, staring at the ceiling. It was just too hard to answer. My heartbeat was out of control and I couldn't move.

'Love, are you alright?' she persisted. With every ounce of effort I could muster, I looked down at her and nodded.

'Do you have any water?' she asked. I shrugged my shoulders and she disappeared, only to return with a bottle of water for me. 'Drink this,' she insisted. I obliged, then watched her refill the bottle from the bathroom tap.

'Thanks,' I managed to say with a slight smile. The conversation was beneficial, as difficult as it was. It forced me to concentrate, rather than be lost in the trip my mind and body were taking. We managed to chat for a while. She was an angel.

Throughout the whole night I remained on that window ledge, unable to move. My heart continued to pound out of my chest, while the freezing night air on the window balanced the excess heat in my body. That beautiful woman continued to come in regularly and check on me, topping up my water bottle and chatting with me each time. I don't know who she was to this day, but I hate to think what would have happened without her.

About half an hour before the club shut, she helped me down. I was still terribly off my head and not enjoying it one bit, but I could speak more clearly. We managed to smile and chat a little, but even though we made slight jest of it, we both knew the

seriousness of what I had been through. I hugged her in thanks before she led me back out into the club to find the lads. They had been looking for me for half the night and were frightfully relieved to see me. 'Keep an eye on her,' the woman told them, giving one of them my hand and saying goodbye with a kiss and a smile.

On the train home, the lads couldn't stop laughing with each other and talking about what a fantastic night it had been, wishing they were still there and sorry the drugs had worn off. I lent my head against the window and feigned sleep, knowing it would be some time before that was truly possible. My heart was still beating out through my chest and my only thought was that I wished it would all just wear off.

From that day on, the days of messing my precious body up with toxic chemicals were behind me. After sleeping for two solid days, I awoke as a new woman, grateful for the huge lesson I had been given. Lying there looking at the ceiling, exhausted from the ride my poor body had been through, my biggest relief was that I had survived. It was time to treat myself with more respect and look after the gift of health I had been given.

Several years later, I was offered an ecstasy pill at a gig, which I declined politely and without hesitation. It felt so foreign to my world by then. I realised I had again grown into a product of my environment, thankfully my new environment. My lifestyle had become one of health. Social times with friends were spent over healthy food, drinking tea around fires, going on long walks, and swimming in rivers. It was an environment that suited me much better. I didn't mind at all being a product of this environment.

Anthony had become a product of his environment in the worst possible way. During my visits in his first year at the nursing home, he would love to discuss current affairs from the radio or television. He was astute and always ready to offer an intelligent opinion or a bit of cheek. He also encouraged me to share stories with him; he was genuinely interested in what was happening in my life.

Over time though, his light faded to the point where he would even decline me taking him outside. Previously we'd had delightful times, soaking up the sunshine and talking to passers-by. Sometimes we would just sit in the garden of the home, watching the birds and catching up with each other that way. Either way, they were always fun times with lots of laughter and conversation.

If any one of his friends or family now suggested he try to learn new skills and create a better life than his current one, he would shut off from listening. 'I don't see the point,' he said to me time and again. 'Things are fine here, I accept this lot in life.' Anthony felt he deserved what had happened to him, due to the harm he had done to others in the past.

'You've paid your dues, Anthony,' I would say. 'You've learnt from it and that's what matters.' But he wouldn't forgive himself, nor could he be bothered creating a better life. Anthony had slowed down to the pace and routine of the nursing home and had no aspirations to return to regular life in society again. His disabilities gave him a sense of relief in a way, as if he didn't have to try anymore. This was despite plenty of people with various disabilities living full and inspiring lives elsewhere. He admitted to me that he didn't have the courage to try anymore, holding his excuses close instead. If he didn't try, he couldn't fail. Not one

ounce of motivation remained in him. As the sun rose and set each day, Anthony chose to sleep his life away.

I continued to visit him occasionally for another year or so, as oppressive as his environment was. One-sided friendships are exhausting for anyone though, and this is what it had become. Anthony had lost the motivation to phone anyone, including me, as he had done before between visits. When I did see him, our conversation revolved around how well his bowels were working and how rude the employees were. His lack of interest in his appearance was also impossible to ignore.

Anthony had grown old before his time. While he was still at least thirty years younger than most of the other residents, he fitted right in. He was a product of his environment. Watching this lovely man's light fade offered me another reminder about how important having courage is, in order to live the life your heart desires. Sadly, his life was an example of what I didn't want.

A few years later, a phone call from his younger brother told me that Anthony had passed away. His life had not changed, including his refusal for any outings from the home, including family gatherings. Anthony had said he just couldn't be bothered. I couldn't help but wonder what his final thoughts were, as he lay in that drab room reflecting on his life.

The impact of Anthony's sense of failure drove me forwards. Due to a total lack of effort, he had created no opportunities to improve or change. Failure was not about whether he would have been successful or not in whatever he tried. Just having a go would have been a success in itself. Anthony's biggest failure lay in becoming a complete product of his environment, lacking any desire to challenge himself and potentially improve his life. It

was such a waste of a good, intelligent person and of the natural gifts he had been born with.

So if we were all to become a product of our environment, myself included, the best thing I could do was to choose the right environments from here on, ones that would suit the direction I wanted my life to move towards. It was still going to take courage to live the way I wanted, but this new awareness of choosing the right environment would at least make the journey easier.

With this consciousness and renewed bravery, I became more mindful of the life I was creating, and the power that lies in the freedom of choice.

Trappings

Not all of my relationships formed with clients started positively. While the bulk of my work was with dying people, sometimes clients needed care due to mental illness. As I'd had a positive, calming effect on other short-term clients, more difficult cases started coming my way. No experience in life is wasted. My past had exposed me to plenty of irrational behaviour that now seemed to help me with difficult people.

A lot of the time I was not terribly fazed by challenging clients, but sometimes my calm persona didn't appease the client at all, no matter what I tried. Arriving at a magnificent mansion, surely one of the best in the city, the warnings I had been given about the lady came to mind. Florence was very defensive about needing care, insisting she didn't need it at all. This was not new to me. Plenty of elderly people were reluctant to accept that they were not as independent as they once were. It wasn't always easy for them to acknowledge that such a time had come.

However, I wasn't at all prepared for the mad woman who came chasing me down the driveway, brandishing a broom and yelling at the top of her voice. Her hair had not been attended to in goodness knows how long; her fingernails were full of dirt or possibly worse. Wearing only one slipper, she hardly represented

the Cinderella fairytale. She looked like she hadn't changed her dress for a year.

'Get out! Get off my property,' she screamed. 'I'll kill you first. Get off my property. You're just like the rest of them. Get out or I'll kill you!'

The broom swished through the air, just missing me. I can handle a lot in life but I am not stupid, nor am I a martyr. I did try for one sentence to placate Florence, but with my words falling on deaf ears and her threats of breaking my windscreen with the broom still lingering, I needed no more convincing. 'Okay, okay,' I said. 'I'm going Florence. It's okay.' She looked wild and untamed as she stood at the end of the driveway defending her territory, a firm hold still on the broom.

Driving off, that image stayed in my rear-view mirror until I was completely out of sight. She didn't budge. As much as it may have appeared to an outsider as a pretty funny scene, my heart couldn't help but feel sorry for her. I wondered who she once was, what her life had been, and what had driven her to become who she now was.

A month later those questions were answered, when I was sent to the same address. Since my earlier visit, Florence had apparently been taken by force and sedated. This scenario is one I hated to imagine. How scared she must have felt. For the past month, she had been in a temporary home for those with mental illness, and she was actually doing quite well. Doctors were happy with her response to the medications and had sent her home with around-the-clock care.

The community nurse was waiting when I arrived. 'She's asleep now, but is due to wake soon. So I will wait with you until after

that,' she explained. Opening the double doors into the mansion, I was greeted by an enormous marble staircase, chandeliers, and a house full of beautiful, antique furniture. I was also greeted by an incredibly rotten stench.

'We've finished the entrance. I'll show you through the rest of the house,' the nurse said, referring to the team of cleaners in the next room. Florence had been living in a filthy rubbish dump for over ten years, with no-one realising until recently, when a neighbour commented to the community nurse about some unusual and erratic behaviour. When the nurse came to see Florence, the extent of her squalor was revealed. Not directly by Florence of course—no-one could approach her—but by looking in the window and seeing the state of her home.

She was surviving on tinned food and had about a year's supply in her pantry. I saw no evidence of anything else, certainly nothing fresh or anything able to be cooked. It was almost impossible to see the kitchen floor for the rubbish. The little bit of visible floor was inches thick in black grime. Florence's bathroom was no better. It was an unhealthy pit of dirty towels, dried-up cakes of soap and obvious signs that no-one had used the shower or bath for a very long time.

The nurse led me downstairs, where another six or so bedrooms and a couple of bathrooms lay in similar neglect. The cleaners were contracted to do the whole house and it was expected to take them a couple of weeks. Downstairs, the doors opened to a filthy swimming pool, uninhabitable even for frogs. Standing by the pool and looking back up to the home and all of its grandeur, I wondered what the walls of this place would say if they could talk.

Florence had been through a positive transformation regarding hygiene while in hospital, and was resting in a lovely, clean nightdress. Her hair was untangled and had been washed and cut. Her fingernails were clean. It was almost like looking at a different woman.

A hospital bed had now replaced her original bed. I was given very firm instructions that Florence was to stay in bed, with the sides up at all times, whenever I was in the home alone with her. Another carer would come in for two hours morning and afternoon to assist me. The mornings were for showering, toileting and breakfast. The afternoons were focused on getting Florence out into the garden or onto the balcony to enjoy some fresh air. Heavy sedation was to be a big part of her management. The rest of the time she would just be mildly doped. As a result of this patient management plan, Florence became much more obliging.

A month passed and we were now in a sparkling mansion. The cleaners had finished the overhaul, but were contracted to continue cleaning weekly. Moments of clarity began flowing from Florence. She even began sharing stories with me about her life, which had once been grand and exciting. She had sailed the world on the most luxurious ships and visited many fabulous places. When she pointed to drawers nearby, I would hand photos to her as she told me about each one. It was hard to believe this was the same person, except at times I did recognise her as the young, beautiful woman laughing in the photos.

I wouldn't say we grew close, but we grew fond enough of each other to accept the situation that had brought us together. There were still moments when I glimpsed that mad, wild woman in her though. Having another carer was definitely required for

her outings from the bed. She was obliging when taking her medications, yet still put up an enormous fight every day with the shower routine and I came to dread hair washing day immensely. But once out of the shower, she was a delight and would pamper herself by the mirror, laughing like the grand woman she had been in days gone by.

Her fortune had been in the family forever. Old, old money, she called it. Her husband had also come from money, but nothing like the league from which Florence had originated. After a series of somewhat questionable business dealings, he was jailed for several years. The one relative Florence allowed into her life told me that it was then that Florence started to become suspicious and paranoid about everyone.

Her husband died within a year of getting out of jail. No opportunity to heal or reduce her paranoia ever presented itself again and her mental instability worsened. She had trusted him completely, believing everyone else was out to get her money and it was other people who were the cause of his incarceration. It made little difference to my association with her whether he was guilty or not, so I didn't ponder over it but simply lent Florence an ear.

Florence accepted life in her hospital bed most of the time. She was just happy to be in her own home. On occasions, she admitted to loving the company we carers brought her. However, a couple of hours before the other carer returned each afternoon, Florence visited the other side and became a totally different woman. I could have almost set a clock by it.

'Let me out. Let me out of this damn bed. Help. Help. Help. HELP,' she would scream, her voice echoing throughout the mansion and off the marble floors. Walking into her room, I would

sometimes manage to settle her for a few seconds, but only a few. I mean, three seconds maximum. Then off it would start again. 'Help. Help. Help. HHHEEEEELLLLLLPPPPP.'

If we weren't in such a luxurious mansion with thick walls and distance between neighbours, I'm sure there would have been people ringing the police daily to report someone screaming. In the end, it made no difference whether I was in the room or not. She would scream for help and to be let out of the bed continually, until the other carer arrived and we let her out.

There was no reasoning with her during these times. While I felt for her and was tempted to let her out, I knew her other side. It was not worth risking my own safety. That image of her chasing me with the broom and her wild determination had never left me. It was glimpses of this belligerent personality that I would see in her afternoon shouting match, convincing me to listen to the professionals who had set the management routine the way they had. I did feel for her though. How awful it must have been to be trapped inside your own home.

Side rails on her bed, legalities and professional decisions were the combined factors trapping Florence. Prior to this though, paranoia had trapped her. Florence's illness had robbed her of the freedom to leave her own home, with an obsessive mistrust of people and what they might steal from her if she did. While most people may not live trapped in a bed, it is possible to create a life where the traps that hold us back are self-created and desperately need releasing.

One of my earliest memories is of being trapped inside a box—but I didn't actually feel trapped. It was a large wooden box off the side of the house in the garden. One of my older siblings

convinced me to climb in, then locked the door on me. I can still remember sitting in the darkness, feeling safe and happy. Even when I was only two or three years old, I knew I liked my own company. The peace was beautiful. My mother's panicky voice came calling some time later, so I called back and all was well. I was let out and returned to the chaos of busy family life.

Other traps were present in my adult life now, though. While I was finding the courage to honour my own directions, one step at a time, old thought patterns were not helping at all. Overcoming my dread of performing was a particularly hard process, as I tried to release myself from these self-made traps.

If someone had told me that photography and writing would eventually lead me to performing on a stage, I may have laughed at the absurdity of such a thought. It started by me selling my photographic work at markets, then galleries. Not enough of them sold to create a liveable income, but there was sufficient encouragement to keep me on that slow and steady path.

From those early signs of support, I decided to work within the photography industry and landed a job in a professional lab in Melbourne. Unfortunately it was an office job and after a year of boredom, fluorescent lights and no windows, I acknowledged it was no more satisfying than any of my previous banking jobs. No opportunity had arisen for me to get into the creative side of the business, so I came to hold no interest in the job whatsoever, eventually starting to make mindless mistakes. I remember sighing a lot in that job; leaning on my elbows, chin in the palm of my hand, trying to find the solution for satisfaction in my working life, and then sighing again.

Yet from this role I came to see that I didn't need to work in the photography industry to take nice photos. With the help of a couple of new and digitally savvy friends, I created a small photography and inspiration book. Again much support for the quality of my work was forthcoming, but not enough to get the book published. The cost of colour printing was a significant factor in the advice I received back from publishers, though some commented it was a beautiful book.

For a few years I gave it everything I had, every ounce of focus and energy. Yet the rejection letters continued to pile up, despite some continuing to come with sincere encouragement. It was during the tears and frustrations from these efforts that I picked up my guitar. I could hardly play it, but proceeded to half-write my very first song. Little did I know the significance of that moment.

Having learnt about the power of surrender, I came to accept that whether the photography book was ever published or not, it didn't really matter in the end. I was already a success in my own eyes, for having had the courage to try. Success doesn't depend on someone saying 'yes, we will publish your book' or 'no, we won't'. It is about having the courage to be you regardless. Feeling that the lessons I had learnt through that whole book process had already brought gifts in themselves, I was finally able to let it go. Perhaps it was simply for my own learning that this book had flowed through me. Or maybe it would find its feet at another time, when I was more ready.

Either way, it didn't matter; I had to let go. My efforts had left me drained, having placed too much emphasis on the book being published. It was time to live again and to stop trying to control the outcome. The song I had half-written also remained semi-forgotten

while I searched for answers, devoting more and more time to my meditation path and healing. After one of many stints away in silence and meditation, I felt a strong urge to finish that half-written song. From that day onwards, I knew that songwriting was a part of my life's work. Not only did I finish the song, but I also wrote another one the same day. I couldn't get enough of it once I started. Songs poured out of me.

As children, we had put on concerts for relatives and friends. Music was in my genes. Despite their other so-called 'sensible' careers, my father was a guitarist and songwriter when he met my mother, who was a singer at the time. Yet I had never experienced a conscious yearning to be on the stage, and I certainly wasn't experiencing it now. In fact, the thought terrified me. It wasn't just the idea of being on a stage, but that my work was calling me into the public arena. I was happy to be anonymous. Plenty of songwriters don't perform and I wanted to be one of those.

However, to get my work heard initially, I needed to perform my own songs. This was terrifying and created enormous internal turbulence for a long time. Trying to find work I loved had already been such a painful challenge, one I never seemed to be able to move past completely. Now I couldn't accept that the work I was very clearly being guided to do would actually put me in the public eye, when I had always loved and guarded my privacy so much. I definitely didn't want to live the life I saw ahead.

We are given lessons to heal though, not necessarily to enjoy in their moment. It was a terribly confronting time. I just longed for life to swallow me up and let me go on unnoticed. It didn't help that I was also receiving a lot of negativity from particular people in regard to my new direction.

I spent a lot of solitary time at one of my favourite rivers, swimming often, and trying to accept that this was where life was going for me. The fresh water cleansed me with every stroke I took. When I swam underwater, the other world slipped away. There were never any sounds out by the river except for birds singing and the breeze blowing softly through the trees on the banks. The peace was healing, so I drank it in often. One day I even saw a platypus, known to be a very shy creature that rarely comes out around people. Such a blessing restored me.

As I sat on the bank, allowing nature to weave its magic on my very weary soul, the breeze so soft on my face, I had to be honest with myself. When all of my life experiences to this point were considered, I saw that deep down a part of me had always known I would be in the public eye, to some degree. The choice to keep some of my life for me was still going to be my own and I could manage that. It was my life after all and my choice how I handled what would unfold.

So in the end I accepted that if this work was a part of my life's path and I could help others by doing so, then hopefully I would somehow grow into my role. Trusting that the learning would help my own growth, irrespective of who else would actually hear my music, also assisted my acceptance. The support of a couple of friends who were musicians was also a lifesaver.

Thinking back to when I first started performing, I feel for the audience as much as myself. Even if the music was tolerable, it was obvious that I found performing painful. My hands would shake, the guitar would bounce, I'd miss strings and my voice would choke up completely. I hated it immensely and was often sick with nerves. Meditation helped me a lot in this regard, as did

practice. Like anything you persevere with, you do eventually get better with practice. Yet through all of these nerves and dread, something drove me on. It was the acceptance that this was a part of my life's work, as well as a yearning to contribute. It was also the desire to be heard and to share my message. An avenue had been presented to share thoughts that had been suppressed for too long.

I was well into my thirties when I finished that first song, and another year or two passed before I started performing. Not being a drinker meant I had to face my fears head-on, without the artificial assistance of alcohol. However, performing helped me to open up. It brought many of its own gifts. While I was caring for Florence, I was also doing the songwriting circuit in city pubs. Most of this I hated. I was very lonely during this time, as my emotional wounds had seen me withdraw a long way into myself. Getting up on stage and singing my songs was something I managed, but didn't enjoy at all.

It did help me to grow though. When you are sharing your personal thoughts with a room full of strangers, it certainly opens you back up again. The consistently positive response to my songs and what I had to say also encouraged me as a songwriter.

Later I came to appreciate that I was playing in the wrong sort of venues for my style and personality. After one too many noisy gigs over the following years, I said goodbye to pub gigs forever. I had done my apprenticeship there. This meant there would be less opportunity to gig, but performing live in pubs and gaining recognition that way wasn't what drove me, so this didn't bother me at all. By then I was also getting into some folk festivals and had experienced the bliss a performer gets when you

have a respectful audience who not only listens to your songs, but understands them totally. That connection with like-minded people is a fantastic feeling. From then on, it was beautiful venues or suitable festivals only.

Thinking back to who I was when I first started performing, I hardly recognise that fragile creature. Now when I play live I am confident, because I am playing in the right venues, to the right audience. My songs are meaningful and mostly gentle. They can be. They are allowed to be. I am not competing with the meat raffle being called out over the microphone in the pubs anymore, or losing connection with the audience because the boxing comes onto the television screens on the walls. If I make a mistake, I laugh gently with myself and carry on. After all, performers are human too.

It is also refreshing that Mr. Invincible is no longer ogling me. You know, the guy who has had the most to drink in the pub and suddenly decides he is Johnny Depp's twin brother? He stands there right in front of the stage, leering at you as he rocks back and forth, somehow managing not to spill a drop of his eighteenth beer. He knows without a doubt that he is God's gift to women as he graces you with a nod and a wink, while gyrating his hips just for you. *And* if you are good enough, he will wait for you side stage to answer all your prayers in the department of men and great lovers. I have known them all, bless them.

As well as having to face my initial terror in performing, every day I continued to walk the creative path was one of courage. I had also recently finished a year of music study. Deciding I'd like to learn more about the industry, I taught myself some very basic music theory, at least enough to pass my audition to the

program. The audition included a very shaky version of one of my own songs too, but I was in. I was a student in my thirties and loved every minute of it.

I had to employ different tools when conquering my performance nerves. Practice was one for sure. Putting myself out there increasingly improved my playing, singing and confidence. The two things that helped me most, though, were the tools I used to set myself free of the mind. These tools apply to anything, not just performing, and have helped in other ways since.

When my nerves would kick in or when negative thoughts surfaced, like *What on earth did I think I was doing up there?,* I would return to my meditation practice mid-song. I didn't actually stop the song or sit on the stage in the lotus position. The singing would continue, as would my guitar playing, but I would change my focus to the breath, observing it going in and out. All the while I would put total trust in my muscle memory, that it would remember where to put my fingers on the guitar and that the words would continue to flow. It was my breath I had to focus on at that moment. This worked incredibly well, as it calmed me down enough to return to the song with better expression and more presence.

The other thing that changed my thinking, and truly said goodbye to the nerves, was when I removed myself from the equation and saw it as a time of giving to those in the audience. A simple prayer was silently said beforehand, thanking the music for flowing through me and bringing these people pleasure. Then I would just get out of the way and enjoy the music as much as the audience.

Performing has taught me many great things. I am very grateful life kept me going with it, when I didn't particularly want to. How can we ever know what gifts are waiting for us through the lessons on hand, if we don't go through them? We can't, until we proceed through. Whether I continue to perform or not in future is really of no relevance anymore. I will if I do, and I'll enjoy it immensely; or I won't if I don't, and I'll enjoy whatever I do instead immensely. It doesn't matter either way. I'll just go where my path leads.

Through mastering my nerves in performing, I had started to master my mind in other ways. I was setting myself free of the trappings I had created through a lifetime of unhealthy thinking patterns. We all have trappings we need to free ourselves from. Most of them are not physical ones and if they are, it is likely they originated from non-physical trappings, such as unhealthy thinking and negative belief systems.

Unfortunately for dear Florence, she was still trapped in her bed at least until the other carer arrived. As my presence did not lessen the volume of her yelling, it was naturally kinder on myself to not be in her room. Occasionally I would poke my head in. She would pause for about two seconds, look at me, then look away and start screaming 'help' again. This lady should have been a singer. She sure had the lungs for it.

Yachts sailed by on Sydney Harbour. Remembering a time when I had been friends with some great guys who sailed, I smiled and wondered where they had all ended up. The sound of the doorbell interrupted my reminiscing.

As we lowered the sides on her bed, the yelling ceased in a microsecond. Just like that. Florence smiled at us. 'Well, hello to

you both. How has your day been so far?' she asked. We smiled at each other, as we helped her out of bed. Although the other carer did not have to endure those hours of Florence's screaming every day, she was still welcomed by it each afternoon.

'Great thanks Florence, and yours?' I asked.

'Oh not too bad, darling. I've just been watching the boats on the harbour. They race on Wednesdays, you know.'

Agreeing with her I said, 'They sure do, Florence.'

Wandering around the garden together, we all marvelled at the colours. It had also been neglected over the years. But the relative who had recently gained power of attorney over Florence's money had insisted the place look beautiful, in case Florence had any moments of clarity to enjoy it. So gardeners had been in to weave their magic and the pool was clear and clean again.

'Look at my beautiful garden,' she told us. 'How spectacular it looks at this time of year.' We both agreed sincerely. Underneath all of the neglect, a lovely garden had remained and was coming back into full glory.

'I was only out here the other day planting these flowers, you know. You have to stay on top of gardening, especially with all of these creepers.' We smiled and again agreed. Considering this place was an overgrown, grungy-looking jungle only a month or two earlier, it was fun to listen to how Florence saw it.

Pulling some vines away from the flowers, she continued. 'You can't get lazy with gardens. They need a lot of love and time.' We asked her about some of the flowers and she replied with amazing clarity and knowledge. 'This vine will trap the flowers and strangle them,' Florence told us, as she pulled some more of the vine away.

I nodded as she continued, 'I would never let anything trap me you know, and I won't let anything trap my flowers.'

As Florence continued to break the constraints around her beautiful garden, I said a silent prayer of thanks, for having found the courage to start breaking free of my own constraints. Like a flower, I too was now free to grow and to bloom.

REGRET 2:

I wish I hadn't worked so hard

Drying the dishes, I heard my client John in his office giggling like a schoolboy. 'Yes, she's just the right age too,' he chuckled, continuing to describe me to his friend on the phone. John was almost ninety. I was still in my thirties and I smiled, shaking my head and recalling a line a man of seventy once told me: 'All men are boys.'

Coming out of his office later, John was the diplomatic gentleman I knew, with no sign of mischief at all. He wanted to take me out to lunch though, and did I have a pink dress to wear? If not, could he buy me one? I laughed and politely declined his offer to buy me a dress, because I did in fact own a pink one. While it was not part of my uniform for care work, I informed him I was happy to oblige an old dying man. His delight was wonderful.

A table for two was booked at a very expensive restaurant. It was the prime table, front and centre overlooking a park across to the harbour. John looked dapper in his navy jacket with gold trimmings, a fresh dose of aftershave lingering in the air. With his hand on the small of my back, he guided me to our table. After looking out at the view, I glanced back to catch him winking to the four men sitting at a table nearby. They were all giggling

while checking me out, but instantly changed to straight faces when they realised they were busted.

'Friends of yours, John?' I asked, smiling. He stammered and admitted that he wanted his friends to see how lucky he was to have a carer of such physical quality. I cracked up laughing. 'Any woman my age is of great physical quality to a room full of eighty-nine-year-olds.' I must admit, his manners were impeccable and I did wish more men from my generation had his charm and dinner etiquette. We had a lovely lunch. John had phoned ahead and explained he was bringing a vegan to the restaurant. They had obliged with a beautiful vegetable loaf, especially baked.

It turned out that his friends were all banned from interrupting our lunch or even coming to the table. He would introduce me afterwards. So after their lunch had long finished, they sat patiently until John and I had finished our food and conversation. Then, again with his hand on the small of my back, he guided me to their table where I played the perfect girlfriend by charming them all, ensuring John received the most attention. He reminded me of a mating rooster with his chest puffed out in pride. It was fun.

Underneath all of this though, there was a man dying. What harm did it do to join such a harmless game in what would be one of his last outings? Once home, out of my pink dress and into more practical work clothes, much to John's disappointment, I assisted him to bed. The outing may have delighted him, but it exhausted him too.

The energy of dying people is so weakened that a small outing is like working an eighty-hour week lifting bricks. It completely drains them. Family and friends often don't realise how their well-intended visits can exhaust sick people. When they are in

their last week or so, visits of more than five or ten minutes can become hard work for the patient, yet this is when they are usually bombarded.

It was just John and I on this afternoon and he slept deeply. Folding my pink dress away in my bag, I was glad to have brought him pleasure through the outing. It had brought me pleasure too.

John had also benefited from my youth in other ways. Understanding computers better than he did, I returned to the job in his office that had begun the previous month. For a man of his age, his approach to computers was admirable as he embarked on grasping the age of technology. His files were a mess though, as he hadn't known about folders and ordered filing. While he slept, I carried on creating categories and finding homes for hundreds of documents, all the while creating an index so things could be found easily.

When I saw his deterioration the following week, I felt very grateful we had already been out to lunch. John would not be leaving the house again. There could still be a few weeks to go, maybe not, but his strength was disappearing rapidly. Sitting out on his balcony late that afternoon, we watched the sun set over the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House. John was in his dressing-gown and slippers, trying to eat a little, but struggling. 'Don't worry about it John, only eat what you can or want to,' I said. We were both aware of the unspoken words behind that sentence. John was dying and it wouldn't be too far away. Nodding, he put the fork on the plate and handed it to me. I sat the tray aside and we continued to watch the sunset.

Out of the afternoon peace John stated, 'I wish I hadn't worked so hard, Bronnie. What a stupid fool I was.' From the

other lounge chair on the balcony, I looked across at him. He needed no encouragement to continue. 'I worked too damn hard and now I am a lonely, dying man. The worst part is that I have been lonely for the whole of my retirement and I need not have been.' I listened as he told me the whole story.

John and Margaret had raised five children, four of whom now had children of their own. The other one had died in his early thirties. When all of the children were adults and gone from the home, Margaret had asked John to retire. They were both fit and healthy, and had enough money behind them to retire well. He always said they might need more. Margaret replied each time that they could sell their huge, now almost empty house and buy something more suitable, freeing up more money. For fifteen years this battle went on between them, while he kept working.

Margaret was lonely and longed to discover their partnership again without children or work. For years she devoured travel brochures, suggesting different countries and regions to visit. John shared the desire to travel and was open to wherever Margaret suggested. Unfortunately, he also enjoyed the status his work gave him. He told me he didn't particularly like the work itself, just the role it gave him in society and among his friends. The chase of closing a deal had also become a bit of an addiction.

One evening with Margaret in tears, begging him to finally retire, he looked at this beautiful woman and realised that not only was she desperately lonely for his company, but they were both old people now. This wonderful woman had waited so patiently for him to retire. Looking at her, she was still as beautiful as the day he had met her, but it was the first time John considered they were not going to live forever.

Although petrified for reasons he could now not justify, he agreed to retire. Margaret had jumped up and hugged him, her tears switching from sadness to joy. But the smile didn't last long, disappearing the minute he added 'in one more year'. At that time, there was a new deal being negotiated in the company and he wanted to see it through. She had waited fifteen years for him to retire; surely she could wait one more? It was a compromise, but one she reluctantly agreed to. As the sun dropped from view, John told me he felt selfish about his choice even then, but he couldn't retire without doing just one more deal.

Having dreamt of this time for years, things started to become real for his beloved wife. She made some actual plans and was on the phone to the travel agent regularly. Each night as he wandered in, she would be waiting for him with dinner prepared. As they ate at the table that had once accommodated their whole family, she shared her thoughts and ideas with great excitement. John was starting to warm to the idea of retirement now too, although he still insisted on seeing out the twelve months if Margaret ever suggested otherwise.

With four months gone since he agreed to retire and eight still to go, Margaret began feeling queasy. At first it was a bit of nausea, but after almost a week it hadn't passed. 'I've made an appointment with the doctor tomorrow,' she told him, as he came in from work. The night was already dark. Traffic continued in the distance, as other workers headed home. 'I'm sure it's nothing though,' she said with attempted cheerfulness.

While John was concerned she was not feeling well, it didn't cross his mind it could be serious until the following night, when Margaret said the doctor had suggested some tests. Even if the

results had not said so, in the following week her discomfort increased and the pain told them something was wrong. They just hadn't suspected how wrong. Margaret was dying.

We spend so much time making plans for the future, often depending on things happening at a later date to assure our happiness or assuming we have all the time in the world, when all we ever have is our life today. It wasn't difficult to understand the deep regrets John was living with. I understand how people can love their work and there is no need for guilt in doing so. I loved my work too, despite the sadness that often accompanied it.

When asked if he would have enjoyed his work so much if he hadn't had such a supportive family life, John shook his head. 'I liked the work enough, sure. And I definitely loved the status, though what's the point of that now? I gave less time to what truly kept me going through life: Margaret and my family. My dear Margaret—her love and support were always there, but I wasn't there for her. She was a lot of fun too. We would have had such a good time away together.'

Margaret died three months before John was due to retire, though he *had* retired by then due to her health. John shared how his retirement had been plagued with guilt ever since. Even when he was able to come to a certain place of acceptance about his 'mistake', as he called it, he longed to be travelling and laughing with Margaret now.

'I think I was scared. Yes, I was. I was petrified. My role had come to define me in a way. Of course now as I sit here dying, I see that just being a good person is more than enough in life. Why do we depend so much on the material world to validate us?' John thought out loud, his random sentences filled with sadness

for both past and future generations who wanted everything, basing their importance on what they owned and what they did, rather than on who they were in their hearts.

'There's nothing wrong with wanting a better life. Don't get me wrong,' he said. 'It's just that the chase for more, and the need to be recognised through our achievements and belongings, can hinder us from the real things, like time with those we love, time doing things we love ourselves, and balance. It's probably all about balance really, isn't it?'

Agreeing, I quietly nodded. A few stars were out above us now and the colourful city lights reflected on the water. Balance had always been a bit of a challenge for me too. It seemed to be all or nothing, even in this role. Twelve-hour shifts were my normal working day and as the clients neared the end, they and their families wanted as much consistency with carers as possible. It wasn't unusual to work six days a week during their last month, sometimes even taking on a sleepover shift in between, which meant I was on duty for 36 hours straight. An 84-hour week is not healthy for anyone, even if you love the work you do.

Sometimes the clients would sleep, but I still had to be there. Plenty of other duties called. It felt like my own life was on hold, though in hindsight it wasn't of course, as this was a part of it too. When the client's life had passed, I was exhausted. It usually turned out that another regular client would not arise for some time after a run like that. So I welcomed the time off, caught up with friends again, returned to my music and writing, and then did it all over again. The time off was wonderful, particularly in large blocks with only a random shift or two somewhere in

between, but the inconsistency put a lot of pressure on my income. If the work stopped, the money stopped.

Around this time, I was offered one day a week as an office manager in a prenatal centre. It was steady work and I loved it. The centre ran birthing courses for pregnant women and mothers' groups. There were weeks when I would go from nursing people who were ready to die that week or very soon after, to having toddlers climbing over me while I worked, placing sloppy kisses on my cheeks.

It was a healthy reminder about the joys of life and its full circle. As a client passed on, a new babe would arrive at the centre. The little ones were so incredibly fragile and beautiful. My boss, Marie, was one of the most wonderful people I have ever known, with a heart as big as they come. I loved her and still do. Part of my role would be to update course material for the prenatal classes. As a result, much of my day would be spent reading about how women of different cultures around the world approached pregnancy and the whole birth process. It reinforced how fear is conditioned into us Westerners, when I learnt how naturally many cultures approached things and how reduced the pain of birth was for some. It was treated as a joyous, beautiful celebration from start to finish.

Being around birth and life was very healthy for me. Hanging out with the dying and having such a strong empathy for the clients and their families did wear me down at times. There are people all over the world who devote their whole lives to working with dying people. Perhaps they mastered detachment more than I have. Or balance. I don't know. My full respect goes out to them regardless. What I do know is that having one day a week

revolve around the beginning of the life cycle, rather than the end, brought lightness I hadn't known was missing. The energy was fresh and alive, like someone had opened the windows for me and let clean air blow through.

Having that contrast on a weekly basis also helped me to see my dying clients as the babies they once were. As new mums proudly showed me their dear newborns, I also considered that the babies would hopefully grow older and live a full life. Then one day they too would reach the end of their lives, as my clients were doing. It was a pretty interesting time, to be so exposed to both ends of the spectrum. It was a blessing.

From all this, I was able to grow in compassion for others in my life, as I recognised that they were also once just fragile little babies and they too would one day die, as I would. I started to see my parents, siblings, friends and strangers as babies and young children, once trusting in life with the innocence and hope that young children do. I thought about who they were before the wounds of others—be that family, peers, or society—were dumped on them, affecting the natural trust and openness they were born with. The goodness of people's hearts became clear to me and I began to love them all with the protectiveness of a caring mother.

No longer did I see the hurtful things said over the years as truly coming from them. The words were coming from their wounds, not the beautiful, pure beings they were born as. Each of those precious babies born decades ago were still a part of them. A dear, little, innocent child also still lived within each of them. And one day they would also receive the wisdom of hindsight that comes to so many with the dying process.

There were times when I thought I didn't love particular people in my life. Now I saw it was only their behaviour and words I did not love. Now I loved their innocent hearts, hearts that once trusted the world would bring them happiness and look after them. When it didn't, suffering kicked in and their pain and disillusionment saw them reacting in ways that were not wholesome. I was no different. I had caused others pain, through my own suffering, my own disappointment that life hadn't turn out as I'd hoped. That little girl whose trust had been broken by being exposed to the pain of others had then reacted with pain of her own.

The hearts of my dear family, and of everyone, still contained that original purity. It was just clouded over with pain and life. Whether I would ever find the happiness and friendship I had once hoped for with some people was still to be determined. Either way, it didn't really matter anymore. I now saw that they were all once beautiful little babies, with all the trust and innocence a baby has. Anything said that was unkind to others was simply the suffering which manifested from a little child who had lost their way, as I had. And for that reason alone, I could continue to love them.

Sitting beside John on the balcony, I saw the fragile child in him; the precious little boy who somehow decided through whatever he had been exposed to, that proving himself through his work was going to make him happier than travelling with his wife. He was an old man now, yet that little innocent child within him was still obvious to me. Tears fell slowly down his cheeks, as he sighed deeply. Leaving him to his thoughts and privacy, I took

the dishes inside and cleaned up. On returning, I placed a rug over his legs and kissed him on the cheek before sitting down again.

'If I can tell you one thing about life, Bronnie, it's this. Don't create a life where you are going to regret working too hard. I didn't know I was going to regret it until now, when I'm facing the very end. But deep in my heart, I knew I was working too hard. Not just for Margaret, but for me too. I would love to have not cared what others thought of me, as I do now. I wonder why we have to wait until we are dying to work things like this out.' Shaking his head, he kept talking. 'There is nothing wrong with loving your work and wanting to apply yourself to it, but there is so much more to life. Balance is what is important, maintaining balance.'

'I agree, John. It has been a lesson for me already. But I'm working on it, don't worry,' I admitted honestly. He knew what I meant. We had shared enough stories by then for him to understand me. John then started laughing to himself. So I questioned him, encouraging him to share the joke.

'Well, I said if there was one thing I could tell you, it is to not regret working too hard. But I just thought of another, almost as important.'

'Go on then,' I smiled.

He looked at me with mischief in his eyes and said, 'Don't you ever throw out that pink dress!'

Laughing, John pointed to my chair then tapped the side of his, indicating for me to bring my chair over, which I did, laughing. Another couple of hours passed as we sat side by side overlooking the harbour, a rug over each of us. Now and then the conversation would drift into a comfortable silence, before more conversation

resumed. Other moments of silence were simply broken by a deep sigh from John. I took his hand and he squeezed mine in response.

Looking across at me with a sad smile, he told me, 'If I can leave any good in this world besides my family, I leave these words. Don't work too hard. Try to maintain balance. Don't make work your whole life.'

John passed away not long after that night. Although I didn't know it then, his words were to be repeated to me time and again by others I came to care for. He had made his point. It was one I would never forget.

Purpose and intention

Word of mouth had begun working in my favour regarding my living situation. The time at Ruth's house was long past, but a network of wonderful people started to see the mutual benefit of me looking after their homes during their absence. While there were occasions when it wore me down, moving house every few weeks or months, it also exposed me to many beautiful homes. One of them even backed onto the home of the wealthiest man in the country, so I was certainly living in some affluent surroundings.

With many of the house-sits came a cleaner and a gardener, sometimes a separate window cleaner too. My only role was to live in the home as if it were my own and to enjoy it. Needless to say, this was not difficult. As well as this being a very wealthy network, some of the people were incredibly creative. The homes were often bright, colourful and welcoming.

It was through one of my house-sitting clients that I came to care for Pearl. Her home was cheerful, as was she, at least as cheerful as possible for a dying person. We liked each other instantly. She also had three dogs, one of which was usually quite timid with strangers, but was sitting on my lap within minutes.

The little black dog's response to me helped Pearl's and my rapport from the start.

Some months earlier, just prior to her 63rd birthday, Pearl had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. Because of her dogs and the love of her home, she was determined to die in her own bed. A friend had already offered to adopt all three dogs when the time came, so Pearl was peaceful about them staying together. She was also quite accepting of her approaching passing.

Many of the clients I had cared for by now had been in denial initially about their situations. They would go through a range of emotions, before finally accepting the inevitable outcome. Other clients were in shock, as the news had been delivered to them in a way that was too much to bear. Occasionally, the conveyer of such dire news did so in a manner that was just too matter-of-fact, not understanding the full impact of their delivery. Sometimes this was family. Sometimes it was medical professionals. True gentleness is definitely needed on such occasions.

Pearl, however, was very much at a place of acceptance that her time had come. A part of what made this easier, she told me, was that she had lost her husband and their only child, a little girl, a year apart more than thirty years ago. She knew in her heart she would be seeing them again soon.

Her husband had been taken suddenly in a work accident, though she didn't like to use the word 'accident', as she believed there was no such thing. 'It was meant to be,' she told me. 'It brought me enormous pain, but with more than thirty years of living since, I have come to see how that loss helped me to become the person I now am and to help others. I wouldn't be who I am without having experienced his passing.'

She was also philosophical about losing her little girl. Tonia had died of leukaemia when only eight years old. 'Losing a child is as bad as everyone says it is. No parent should have to experience it, but they do you know, all over the world, every single day. I am merely one of many.' I listened and appreciated the peace that came over her, as she discussed her daughter. 'I am glad for her that she didn't suffer too long. I believe she came into my life to teach me the joy of unconditional love. Since then, I have been able to give that to others, even without being related to them. Dear Tonia, my dear little angel.'

The memories had faded from being clear pictures in Pearl's mind, but had not diminished at all in her heart. Her love was as strong as ever. Love doesn't die, she told me joyously. She shared how life had been difficult after Tonia's passing, taking quite a few years for the wheels to start turning properly again. Yet she didn't ever see herself as a victim. While she knew the pain of losing a child and wouldn't wish that on anyone, she'd also known the joy of having a child. As she pointed out, not everyone has that opportunity.

We agreed there is always a gift in any challenge. 'People play the victim forever,' she continued. 'But who are they kidding? They are only robbing themselves. Life doesn't owe you anything. Neither does anyone else. Only *you* owe yourself. So the best way to make the most out of life is to appreciate the gift of it, and choose not to be a victim.'

I explained to Pearl how I had known quite a few victims in my time, but my biggest wake-up call came when I recognised that pattern in myself. It had taken me completely by surprise when

I realised that I had become so caught up in my wounds, I was only able to focus on how hard my life had been.

She agreed without judgement. 'We can all be guilty of it at some time. There is a fine line between compassion and a victim mentality. Compassion, though, is a healing force and comes from a place of kindness towards yourself. Playing the victim is a toxic waste of time. It not only repels other people, it also robs the victim of ever knowing true happiness. No-one owes us anything,' she continued. 'We only owe it to ourselves to get off our backsides, count our blessings, and face our challenges. When you live from that perspective, the gifts pour forth.' I loved this woman.

She continued speaking about how hard many people's lives are, how some folks are given such enormous challenges, yet they still manage to soldier on and find happiness in little things along the way. Yet others complain nonstop about their lives, when they have no idea how good they really have it, compared to others. Agreeing with Pearl on this was easy. Despite the pain I still carried at times, I didn't lose sight of the blessings I received too. There was always someone much worse off.

When Pearl did manage to get her life on track again after the loss of her husband and daughter, she threw herself into her work for several years. It was work that she liked doing. She loved her co-workers and the customers; she felt part of her reason to be there was to keep them inspired and happy, which she did well. Yet there was always an emptiness in her. For almost two decades, she had put it down to the loss of her family.

A passing comment one day changed her life. Outside work hours, she found herself helping a customer who was developing a new community program. Without being terribly conscious of it,

Pearl became more and more involved, simply because she loved the project and what these people were about. 'For the first time in more than twenty years, I knew passion again. And do you know why?' she asked, as I waited. 'I had purpose, true purpose. That was what the emptiness had been with my work. It didn't have enough purpose for me.'

That was not difficult for me to relate to. I shared my previous work history with Pearl, including the struggles I'd been through until I found myself working in palliative care and in music, both of which were bringing increasing contentment. She agreed that my work truly had purpose, particularly compared to other roles I had done. But like me, she believed anyone could find true purpose in his or her work, if they are in the right field for who they are. It was just a matter of perspective.

Pearl's home had a beautiful conservatory where the winter sun would shine in on us through the glass roof. It was bright and lovely. Each morning I would wheel her out there, usually with at least one dog on her lap, sometimes all three. We would drink gallons of fresh herbal teas, while delighting in the gift of each new day. When I commented to her that being there didn't feel like work at all for me, she brightened up and said, 'Of course, that is how it should be. When you are doing work you love, it doesn't feel like work. It is simply a natural extension of who you are.'

The community project evolved into Pearl finding her life's work. Within a year, she had resigned from her old job and was fully devoted to her new role. Initially, the pay was less but she didn't care. Over time, it increased. 'Sometimes you have to take some steps back to get a run-up before you jump,' she laughed. 'Money is so misunderstood. It keeps people in the wrong jobs

forever because they think they won't be able to make money doing what they love, when it can really be the other way around. If you totally love what you do, you can become more open to the flow of money, because you are more absorbed in your work and are happier as a person. Of course, it takes some time to change your thinking and stop trying to work out how the money will come.'

A friend of mine had once expressed this well, so I shared it with Pearl. We put too much emphasis on the money. What we need to do is work out what we want to do—what project—then work towards that with focus, determination and faith. Don't make it about the money. Make it about the project instead. Then the money will attach itself to you naturally, often through unimagined sources.

My leaps of faith had taught me this already. When the money stopped, it was usually because I was focusing on that fear of lack, so I received more lack. When I focused on the beauty of the day, counted my blessings and worked towards whatever I was being guided to do, whatever I needed would flow my way.

One of the greatest rewards for having the courage to keep working towards what I wanted was when I recorded my first album. The timing was going to be perfect, as I would be living in one of my favourite and most regular house-sits, where we could record. It was a gorgeous dark-pink house, overlooking a pocket of rainforest. The same block of time worked well for all involved. My producer in particular was very busy, but had managed to allocate the time. Other musicians were also happy with the schedule. There was only one thing missing. Money! I had some, but not enough.

Everything in me said to prepare as if it were happening, so I did. Musicians were booked in. I dedicated time to rehearsing and fine-tuning songs. But as the days drew nearer, the faith that had propelled me began to waver. I felt deep down that I wouldn't have been guided to do this if it wasn't possible. So during stronger moments, total belief existed that it would all go ahead. After all, I had made other leaps of faith in the past. I believed in myself and in my ability to draw the things I needed to me. But fear was starting to bubble to the surface, to the point where my faith could no longer keep a lid on it.

We were due to begin recording on a Monday. It was Friday afternoon and the money had still not turned up. Fear began raging. The producer could not afford the time off unpaid. The other musicians had limited time available too. Beginning to panic, I went straight to my meditation cushion and sat. Tears sprang forth. They had been building for a few months, while I had tried to stay totally focused and strong. Now they were pouring out. Sobbing, I released all of my frustrations, admitting that I couldn't do it anymore. I had no strength left. I had done what I was guided to do, but couldn't keep going. It was all too hard. I just could *not* do it anymore.

Then 'Ahh!' That beautiful moment of surrender! There it was. There was nothing more I could do. I simply had to hand it over to greater forces. Feeling frightened and drained, I decided to go out and see some music as a distraction. A friend phoned just then, not knowing my situation, and invited me to come out with her and another friend to a cafe/bookshop. That felt more appealing than heading out alone to see a band, so I accepted. Promising myself I'd enjoy the night and forget about my situation,

I headed out happily. Tomorrow was a new day and I would deal with things then, but tonight I just needed to forget about it.

As my friend Gabriela browsed through the books, I sat on the lounge in the cafe chatting with her friend. Leanne and I had met only once, very briefly in passing a few years earlier, and had not crossed paths since. She asked where I lived, so I explained my house-sitting life. This intrigued her but also assisted, as she was about to go into the housing market and valued my opinion on the different suburbs I had lived in. When she questioned further, I told her how I had fallen into this lifestyle as a result of wanting to be rent-free and to work on my creative stuff, particularly music.

Leanne was going through a very messy divorce and welcomed the distraction of conversation as much as I did, so it continued to flow. She then asked about my album and I was brought back to my current situation, regretful that I had allowed the conversation to move onto this topic. But I told her honestly where things were at, and how I was waiting on a miracle to save me.

She asked me more about the album, about the people working on it with me, what instrumentation we had planned, where I'd come from with my music and what drove me to perform. Then, without a moment's hesitation, she declared that she had always wanted to support the arts, did not know who to support, was going through a crappy time in her own life, needed to do something positive, and would be at my place on Monday morning with the cash I needed.

Tears of relief and joy burst out of me. I couldn't believe it. Without a thought, I hugged her sincerely, fighting back the urge to completely break down sobbing. It was over. I had done it. The album was happening. The money had attached itself to me.

Leanne came along for some of the recording. It was lovely to have her there, lying on the long carpet listening through headphones as we sang and played, recording each new track. She was pretty detached from it all, though. To see it happening was enough for her. What a beautiful, generous woman she was. This incident gave me strength for every leap of faith afterwards too. The help does come. We just have to get out of the way.

Pearl delighted in this story as it reinforced everything she believed in. 'That's exactly right. Fear blocks us up entirely. Money is just another kind of energy, one that wants to bring good and happiness. But we use it wrongly, giving it power, chasing it, fearing it, unbalancing our lives in its pursuit, as we obsess over it,' she stated. 'It is as available as the air we breathe. We don't waste our time worrying if there will be enough air. We shouldn't waste our time worrying if there will be enough money. Those very thoughts are what block the natural flow of this loving, creative energy to us.'

When Pearl had first joined the community project, funding had been a constant concern for the people already working there. All of their energy had been going into *how* the money would be found, not *why* it was needed. Thankfully, the team of workers was open to Pearl's philosophies. While they didn't initially have enough faith in themselves to believe they could attract the funds needed for each section of the project, they had faith in Pearl's faith. So they agreed to keep working towards the project's success, trusting that the funds would come, all the while taking whatever active steps were possible to assist this. They were also learning to let go when there was no more that could be done; to just keep working, as if the funds were already on their way. Pearl's faith

was unwavering though, and as a result, she inspired the team enormously.

Money soon began to flow to the project from numerous unexpected sources, creating great joy among the workers. The program expanded into another suburb, helping more people. In a few years, Pearl and some others were all earning decent money, expanding the program yet again, helping more and more people in need, and never for a moment feeling like it was work.

The sun had now moved over the house and we returned to the living room, where I had lit the fire a little earlier. Pearl was exhausted but didn't believe in going to bed until it was evening, if she could help it. She took her rests during the day on the settee by the fire. Making her comfortable, I adjusted the pillows and placed a lovely big rug over her. Like Pearl and all of her home, it was colourful. The fire threw beautiful light across the room, offering a feeling of comfort. When she was settled, the dogs jumped up and snuggled in. It was a beautiful scene: Pearl, the dogs, the fire, and the colours of her home.

'It is about intention mostly, this money thing,' she declared. Carrying a chair over to be closer to her, I continued to listen, enjoying her thoughts. 'Money flows best when the intention is honourable. We were able to find funds for the project because it was for the good of others. Of course we benefited from this too, by earning money doing what we loved, as well as enjoying a sense of purpose in our lives.'

Pearl stressed that this is why purpose was so important in our work. If it has purpose, we naturally approach it with the right intention. Any work with purpose will benefit someone else somehow. The money will come to support that intention,

providing we take what action we can and don't block the flow with fear. People of middle age, in particular, find many questions arising and feel a longing to somehow connect with the world through their work. That is the natural yearning for purpose that Pearl spoke of.

She was an intelligent and wise woman, who shared her thoughts freely. I imagined it would have been the same easy flow between us, even if she hadn't been dying. Pearl continued, stating that parents, for example, don't always recognise their own worth and how their intention to raise happy children is one of the greatest contributions anyone can make to society. It breeds good adults. She hated to hear any mother say they were *just* a mum, when it was a job of true purpose. The same went for people in their gardens, celebrating the beauty of the earth.

Thinking of a lovely lady I had known when I was living over in Perth, I shared how her garden had brought me happiness every morning as I walked to the train station. It brought so much pleasure with blooming flowers and colourful trees that I ended up putting a card in her mailbox to thank her for the delight she gave me. The garden truly did make every day better for me. Colourful flowers and exotic plants worked in beautiful symmetry with each other, each day revealing another change, another view. People don't always realise the joy they bring to others. One day I finally saw the gardener herself, an eighty-year-old woman, and told her how much I loved her place. It took Yvonne no time to work out that it was me who had written the card and so a new friendship began.

'Yes, that was her purpose—the garden. Finding purpose in life is one of the most important things ever,' Pearl went on. 'In

some ways, I wish I hadn't wasted all of those years in a job that was pleasant but of very little significance to my life's true work, the work I found through the project. It led me to where I was meant to be, though I guess it was a customer from there who helped me find my way to that change. It can take years to work out what you want to do, and it did for me. But the satisfaction that awaits will make the search worth it for anyone.'

Considering the struggle I had also gone through to find work that satisfied me, I agreed it was worth it. Sitting by the fire with this beautiful woman and three sweet-natured dogs, I felt incredibly grateful to be able to call this my work. I told Pearl so and she smiled in agreement.

'If I had any regrets, Bronnie, it would be that I wish I'd not spent so many years in an average job. Life is over so quickly. I knew this from losing my family. But sometimes we can 'know' things for a long time before we are ready to act on them. So I could regret it, but I am not going to. Instead I prefer to gently forgive myself for not being ready to leave that job sooner, for not seeing the signposts clearly enough until later.' Agreeing that self-forgiveness was a much healthier state than regret, I told Pearl how much I was learning through my clients.

She laughed saying, 'That's right. You have no excuse. You cannot go to your deathbed and say you wished you'd worked it out sooner. You are being blessed by all of our mistakes instead.' I laughed in response, but could see the talking was exhausting Pearl. After ensuring her comfort, I closed the curtains, leaving her to rest in the light of the fire. Standing at the door watching her and the three dogs for a moment, a slow tear escaped and rolled quietly down my cheek.

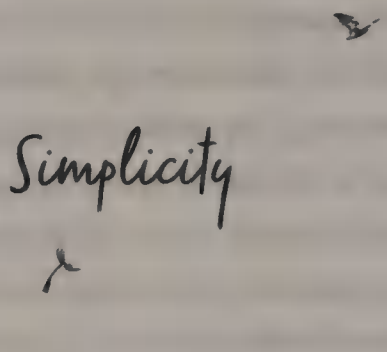
Although I was still learning to realise my true worth, I was overwhelmed with gratitude that at least I now had a job with heart. After making a cup of chai, I enjoyed the comfort of another peaceful room while Pearl slept. It was a quiet afternoon in the neighbourhood, though it would have made no difference here. It was always a peaceful home, both in volume and energy.

I shared another few weeks with Pearl. She grew weaker every day and finally accepted that getting out of bed was just too hard. Acknowledging that she had appreciated her home to its fullest, she asked me to continue appreciating it for my remaining time there, on her behalf. I smiled and said 'no worries', but it was Pearl I appreciated much more than her lovely home.

Friends came to say their goodbyes, including those she had worked with on the community projects. They spoke of how she had changed their lives and how her work had left a permanent footprint, helping so many others.

When I closed the door behind me on the day of Pearl's passing, I walked out into a day of beautiful winter sunshine. Pausing and taking a deep breath, I welcomed the winter sun shining down on my face. Through all of that searching during my years in the banking industry, it had only ever been my intention to find work I loved.

Now I smiled in the winter sunshine, thinking of Pearl and the wonderful person she was. I had indeed found work I loved and for that I felt blessed. It took some time for me to move away from her front garden, lost in my thoughts and gratitude, and sending Pearl love. Either way, it didn't matter. I was smiling and I had my work to thank for that.



Understandably, the families of those dying also suffered enormously during their loved one's final weeks. The age range for most families was early forties to late fifties, with the majority having children themselves.

The fear of losing their parent, and perhaps the fear of their own pain, triggered some intense behaviour. I regularly witnessed how detrimental it is to live in a society that tries to keep death hidden. People are not only unprepared to deal with the enormity of emotions that surface, but become desperately scared and vulnerable—the families of the dying often more so. The clients found their peace before they departed, but their children often had emotions totally out of control, blindly ruled by fear and panic.

Working in private homes exposed me to the lifestyles and dynamics of a huge number of families. It taught me that almost all families have challenges on some level: things to heal and learn through each other. Some were not aware of the triggers each person released, but they were definitely there. When I would hear siblings getting impatient or upset with their brother or sister, I would respectfully stay out of it while trying to view the situation as compassionately as possible.

Control issues were paramount at this time. Often there was one sibling who wanted to control everything: the running of the home, the grocery list, the carers, the approaching funeral, everything. When other siblings tried to contribute or have a say, arguments sometimes broke out. Everyone had a right to contribute, but the controlling person in the family often intensified their need to rule even more. It was heartbreaking to watch this exhibition of power, or attempted power, as it was so fear-driven.

The wellbeing of the client was my first priority, over absolutely everything else. So when I heard a screaming match begin and intensify over Charlie's bed, I was into the room in a flash. My lovely client lay beneath his adult children, Greg and Maryanne, as they screamed desperately at each other across the bed, out of control. 'Enough of this, please,' I stated gently, but firmly. 'Take it into the other room if you must continue. Look at your dad. He is lying here dying, for goodness sake.'

Maryanne burst into tears, apologising to her father. Charlie was a peaceful man and always had been apparently. 'He just hassles me all the damn time,' she said of her brother. Maryanne had beautiful blue eyes and long black hair, someone who should be an artist's model, I thought to myself. But her eyes were red from crying, and so sad.

Without pause, Greg retaliated in anger. 'Well, I don't see why you should get as much as me in the will. You moved away. You've made less effort. I have worked harder and been here for Dad the most since Mum died.' My heart ached for Greg and this reasoning. A fragile, wounded, little boy still lived beneath his words. I could see their dad in both of them, but I think Greg must

have looked like his mum too. His hair was brown and his skin fairer than his sister's. He wasn't crying, though. He was fuming.

I looked to Charlie for direction but he just shrugged at me, a look of sadness in his big blue eyes. Leading them out I said, 'I think it may be best if you both come out of the room now. This is not helping anyone, especially your father.' With tea made, we sat in the kitchen and I listened to them talk. Maryanne didn't have so much to say and when I asked her why, she said it wasn't worth the hassle. Underneath the hurtful words between them, I could still see love. Thinking back to how honesty had begun repairing my own family situation, I encouraged them to talk.

My relationship with my father, in particular, had once been tumultuous and very painful for me. With honesty, compassion and time, it had experienced remarkable healing. We were now enjoying a very respectful, humorous and loving friendship. There was a time I would have never dreamed it possible; but any family relationship can be healed, if love still remains and both parties are willing. It was obvious that love still existed between Greg and Maryanne, as did a yearning to be understood by each other. It was all just distorted by pain.

After they had both shared their grievances, I asked what they liked about each other. 'Nothin',' Greg replied gruffly. I lightened the situation with humour and before long he came up with a couple of things. Maryanne likewise named a few things. Their egos were battling with this, particularly Greg's, as he wanted to hate her. What drove me to suggest this was that it had worked for me, when thinking of some of my own family members. During those years when my relationships with them were most painful, I tried to draw on things I liked or loved about them. I was the

same as Greg at first, struggling to come up with anything. It was only my pain talking, blinding me from seeing good things in them. When I let go of that, I saw that even though our lifestyle differences may never see us sharing especially close connections, they were all decent, good-hearted people.

I was able to recall things they had done with kind intentions in the past. While some of these were unfortunately used against me later, the initial intentions had been kind. There were also occasions I could recognise when, in their own individual ways, they had tried to show me their love. I had been so wounded myself that I had rebuked it, pushing it away. They were all sweet people underneath any misunderstandings, as most people are beneath the stuff that clouds their best self. On that day it was Greg and Maryanne's turn to work through some of their disagreements.

It turned out that Greg had carried resentment for his sister for decades, simply because she had courageously lived the life she had been guided to—the life she wanted. It wasn't Maryanne who had stopped Greg doing this for himself. It was Greg. A great deal of emotion came out that afternoon and while they were certainly not best friends by the end of the day, they were much further along than at the start. Each of them then spent some individual time in with Charlie before they headed off. Then it was just Charlie and me again.

Walking back into his room after they had left, he looked at me while shaking his head and laughing gently. 'Well, my dear girl. That one has been building for about twenty years, I reckon. I'd always wondered when the volcano would blow,' he chuckled. 'I am glad it has happened before I die. Maybe I will see them become friends, after all.'

Birds were singing in the native trees outside the window and an orange butterfly flew by. We both watched it, smiling, and then went back to chatting. Charlie told me how they had always been very close as children; Greg always looked out for his little sister and she idolised him. When she became an independent thinker as a teenager, they had begun fighting and never found their closeness again.

'It's not Maryanne I worry about, Bronnie. She is relatively happy. It is Greg. He has never stopped trying to prove himself. When he says he always did more for me than Maryanne, he is right in some ways, although she has helped greatly in other less obvious ways. But he didn't have to. Most of the time, he was doing things I could still do myself, and would have actually liked to.' Sighing, Charlie went on. 'He works ridiculous hours in a job he hates, raising children who never see him, and I don't really know why.'

'Does he know you love him, Charlie?' I asked boldly.

He looked at me, puzzled. 'Well, I suppose so. I always comment if he's done a good job here, around the house. He knows I am proud of him.'

'How? Do you ever tell him directly that you are proud of who he is as a person, rather than of the job he's done?' I asked.

He paused for a moment. 'Not directly, no. But he knows,' Charlie replied.

'How?' I persisted.

Charlie laughed. 'You damn women. You have to get to the depths of it all, don't you?' Laughing, I then shared my thoughts with Charlie. He listened respectfully and openly. I wondered if what he had said about Greg always trying to prove himself was

actually due to him seeking his dad's love and approval. The conversation continued, as I showered Charlie then wheeled him back to bed. He preferred an afternoon shower, but it was starting to exhaust him. Before long it would be bed baths only. His breathing was poor and it took time for him to get it regular again once back in bed. Each day saw him become frailer. I left him to rest.

Poking my head back in a couple of hours later, he turned to me and smiled. I sat beside the bed, assisted him to have a drink, and asked if he needed anything else. He shook his head, then continued to talk about his children. 'All I want for them is to be happy. That's all any parent should want of their children. I wish Greg would stop working so hard, by making his life simpler. He is a good man, but he is not happy in himself,' he told me. 'The simple life is the happy life. It's how their mother and I always lived. We didn't really have a choice. It was hard then, but simplicity is still possible today. It's a good choice.'

A photo of Charlie as a dashing young man standing beside his bride was in the centre of the mantelpiece in his room. I thought of him and his wife raising Greg and Maryanne as infants. Charlie was a straight talker and I liked that about him. There was something very old-fashioned about his honesty. He continued to share whatever came to mind as he thought out loud. 'You know, I don't think he truly knows I love him. I've never said the words exactly.'

'We are all different, Charlie,' I said. 'Some people know through actions, but most people need to actually hear it. Perhaps Greg is one of those people. What is it going to hurt anyway, by you telling him?'

He nodded. 'I do need to tell him. What a terrible world we live in when a 78-year-old man is nervous about telling his son he loves him. I've had no practice in this, you know,' he half laughed. Then his face became serious. A clear decision and determination became obvious. Charlie continued. 'Do you think I might be able to convince him to live a simpler life if he is not trying to seek my approval anymore, if he knows I love him? And I *do* love him.'

I said to Charlie that no-one could determine how another would react. There were no guarantees this would change Greg's lifestyle. The important thing was that it might bring him more peace, knowing he had his dad's love and approval.

The topic of living simply became more of an important issue for Charlie, as his days wore on. He said people work too hard for all sorts of reasons. Often they think there is no choice, because they cannot get off the wheel of routine with bills and supporting their family. Charlie understood this. He agreed that survival is a genuine challenge for many people, but insisted there were always choices. 'It is a matter of changing your perspective sometimes. Do we really need to live in a house this big? Do we need such a flashy car?' he asked. As he said, sometimes it was more a matter of changing their thinking and finding a new solution, thinking hard about what they love and working as a family towards finding more balance.

Community was also a way towards simplicity, Charlie explained. If we work together as a community, we don't need as many resources. There is less waste and we learn to help each other out. Ego and pride stop many communities from ever being born or developed. If we want to live more simply and resourcefully, it is important to start understanding the huge importance and

need of community in the area we live in. He was sad that times had become so fast and unbalanced that we had forgotten this.

Charlie acknowledged that it could be very difficult financially in these times. He said society had lost sight of true priorities, and it was society itself that needed a lesson in simplicity. But this only ever happens when individuals change themselves first, one person at a time. Then eventually society will follow the way the majority thinks and lives, as it always does.

He also believed those in power needed a good kick in the pants. There were some good people dotted throughout the political systems of the world, but they were often restricted by red tape and by others with more money and power. So to make a significant change, every one of us had a job to do. Simplifying our lives was a very good place to start.

Charlie had raised a family of his own. He fully understood the pressure of survival and supporting a family. He was also dying and seeing things from a different perspective, wishing out loud to have realised all of this sooner. He could have guided Greg differently. 'Children are happier having more time with their parents than having more toys. They may complain at first, but the happiest children are those who get quality time with their parents—both parents if possible. Young boys also need more male influence. How can Greg's boys get that if he is working all the time, trying to prove himself?' Charlie sat thoughtfully as new insights registered. 'I do love my boy. I need to tell him, don't I?' I nodded.

Out of the blue, he asked, 'Is your life simple?'

I laughed gently. 'Yes. My physical life is quite simple, Charlie, and I am working on simplifying my emotional life, one step at a

time,' I replied honestly. I continued to laugh as I thought about the complications of my emotional life in recent years, which had been far from simple. 'Meditation had helped me hugely to simplify my thinking. All of my life benefits from this in one way or another. It has allowed me to move through a lot of stuff that used to hold me back, transforming me. So my thinking is much, much simpler these days. And yes, my physical life is pretty simple too.'

Charlie came from a different lifestyle and generation. He didn't know anything about meditation, other than that people overseas in orange robes sat with their eyes closed. He asked me what it was. I explained it as simply as possible, telling Charlie that by learning to focus the mind, we become better able to observe our own thinking. From this it becomes clear just how much of life is shaped by a mind running wild on its own, creating unnecessary suffering and fears. As these unhealthy thinking patterns grow and intensify, we become identified with this personality being who we are and shaping our lives around that. When actually, we are not this but so much more.

We are wise, intuitive beings who have become blinded by the fears and misperceptions our minds have created over the years, through all of its reactions, both positive and negative. By learning to focus our mind in meditation—for example, by observing our breath—we begin to take back ownership of our own thinking. This prompts the choice to consciously think better thoughts and, therefore, create happier lives.

Charlie sat speechless, staring at me. I smiled, waiting. 'Wow!' he finally said. 'Why didn't I meet you fifty years ago?' Laughing, I hopped up and gave him another sip of his drink.

'Why didn't *I* meet me years ago, Charlie?' I laughed. 'It would have saved me a lot of pain!'

The conversation continued, leading him to ask about the simplicity of my physical life and what I had meant by that. After many years of moving, I told him, I had started to question the importance of belongings. With some moves, my furniture came with me. At other times, it was stored either for free on family farms, or in a shed I had to pay for. Whenever I was living a chapter free of those belongings, I was reminded that I didn't need any of it to be happy. I would question why I was keeping it at all.

So I had sold my furniture, reducing my belongings to just household goods. These would enable me to set up again somewhere new when the time came, which it would, as I always loved my own kitchen space.

Drifting suited me. There was a great freedom in it. But even freedom has its price. Everything has a price. Missing my own kitchen was what usually made me want to settle again for a time.

Yet after settling for twelve to eighteen months, I would be missing the excitement of leaping out into the unknown all over again. Owning things would leave me feeling terribly weighed down. Recognising my own patterns, I came to accept that for these years in my life, I would actually be better off if I owned nothing much at all. Each time I had started again, furniture had come my way easily, through word of mouth, second-hand shops and yard sales. I loved that. Buying second-hand things was also more conducive to my love of the Earth, as it required no more of her diminishing resources. Our throwaway society seems to forget that everything new has to come from somewhere, and everything old has to end up somewhere. Mother Earth has to

bear the burden at both ends. This comes at a dangerous price for our planet's survival and that of all its creatures, we humans included.

As it was, they were always fascinating things I ended up with, creating a whole new home. It never occurred to me that the furniture would not come. So as a result, it always did and very easily. I've owned some gorgeous pieces over the years. If furniture came my way so naturally each time I settled, then surely everything else would too.

After I'd paid storage on my belongings for twelve months, it became clear this was a waste of money and an encumbrance I didn't need. So with the help of a beautiful and dependable friend, we set up a garage sale at his place. Cutlery, books, floor rugs, linen, ornaments, paintings, everything went. It was a fun time, watching the excitement of people, as my things became their new bargain belongings. Everything that remained was taken to a charity shop that afternoon.

By then I was driving a car the size of a shoebox. The jeep had exited life in spectacular fashion a year or so earlier, taking its last breath in the middle of a six-lane highway. My current car, while incredibly economical and nippy around the city, was *tiny* and affectionately known as 'the rice bubble'. The intention of the garage sale was to own no more than would fit inside the rice bubble.

A total of five boxes remained. Two boxes of my favourite books were included. I only kept those I knew I would read again, or ones I would lend or give to others for inspiration. The rest of the books found themselves in new hands to be enjoyed again elsewhere. The remainder of the boxes contained CDs,

journals, photo albums, a few small things of sentimental value, the patchwork quilt my mother made me, and my clothing. With the rice bubble packed to the max and the stereo on, I headed off into another period of my life.

Music was a brilliant travelling companion. I sang happily and freely, miles unfolding, marvelling that all of my belongings in the world were there with me in the rice bubble. About a thousand kilometres on, I stopped at my folks' place and offloaded the boxes. After that, it was just my clothes and me.

Charlie listened to my story with delight, rubbing his old, weathered hands together in joy. I then shared how, after that trip, I had drifted for a while. Now I was in Sydney, experiencing the life of a house-sitter extraordinaire and, indeed, my physical life was actually quite simple. Charlie realised I understood his point on the importance of simplicity. We agreed that it is not always obvious to people that having excess belongings can actually weigh them down, even if they have no intention of moving on. Clearing out physical belongings always leaves a person feeling more spacious within.

Greg arrived the next day and spent the whole time in with his father. At Charlie's request, I had phoned Maryanne and asked her not to visit. Tomorrow it would be the other way around. Maryanne would have her father all to herself and Greg would stay away. Charlie had asked me earlier to discreetly pop in now and then, in case things were awkward between him and Greg. My presence would hopefully alter this, but there was no need. The couple of times I did go in there, to deliver a pot of tea or pass on a message, it was obvious that an important personal discussion and sharing was underway.

Not long before Greg was due to leave so his dad could rest, they called me in. Greg's eyes were bloodshot from crying and they were holding each other's hand. 'Bronnie, I just want you to know too,' Charlie announced. 'I love this man with all of my heart. He is a good son and a great man.'

At this, of course, I almost cried. 'My son is already enough,' Charlie said. 'There is nothing for him to prove. There is nothing he needs to do, or have, to become a better person. I love this man sitting here completely and being his father has brought my life great joy.'

Through my laughing smile, I said that Greg was blessed to have Charlie as his dad too. Greg agreed, using his whole sleeve to wipe his tears. 'And Dad reckons I could learn a thing or two from you about simplicity,' he announced.

Laughing, I replied that his dad still had enough time left to leave his own mark on Greg in that regard. He didn't need me to do the job for him. Still, as a departing remark I said with a smile, 'All I will add is: *keep it simple*.'

Maryanne came around the next day. I heard her laughing and crying with her dad as well. There was a lot of love being shared in this household and I couldn't help but be affected by it. During the next few weeks, the three of them spent a lot of time together and grew much closer. Never did I hear Charlie say goodbye without telling them both individually that he loved them, and they both said the same to him. The channel of communication had been opened in time for healing to happen, while Charlie was still alive.

On the day of his passing, Greg and Maryanne both sat by Charlie's bed, each holding one of their dad's hands. At their request, I sat in the room too as he slipped away peacefully, his

breathing slowing until it ceased completely. It was a clear morning and birds continued to sing outside his window, as they always had. I thought how it added beauty to the occasion. They were singing him on.

Leaving Greg and Maryanne alone, I sat out on the verandah for a while, enjoying my own memories of Charlie and sending him prayers and good wishes on the road ahead, wherever he was. When I came inside again, Greg and Maryanne were sitting on the same side of the bed, holding hands as they looked at their dad, laughing and smiling through tears, speaking of him with joy.

About a year later, I received an email from Greg. He and his family had sold their big home. He had taken a transfer with the company he was working for, was earning less money, but was now living in a small country town. He commuted to work the same distance as before, but it was on a country road to a bigger country town. It took him less than half the time of his previous commute. This gave him an extra hour and a half to spend with his children every workday. The cost of living was also less, as their lives had become simpler. Yet their quality of life had improved enormously. His wife was happy too and they all loved their new friends and lifestyle. He thanked me for looking after their father and spoke lovingly of Maryanne, who apparently had just been there visiting.

Understandably, the email brought me much joy. It took me back to Charlie, his blue eyes, delightful smile, and the conversations we had shared. Knowing that his words had not only been heard, but also applied, was a wonderful feeling.

The very best of the email was how Greg had signed off. After wishing me well in my own life, he summed things up with three little words, leaving me with a huge smile.

Keep it Simple.

Indeed, Greg and Charlie. Indeed.

REGRET 3:

I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings

For a dying 94-year-old, Jozsef looked remarkably well. He was a gentle person with a lovely smile that made him look like a young boy at times. His quiet but very quick sense of humour helped me warm to him straight away.

Jozsef's family has decided not to tell him he was dying. I found this difficult but tried to respect their decision. Over the next few weeks his illness took a drastic turn downhill, which was impossible to ignore. Standing unaided became a thing of the past. With each new day, he depended more and more on my strength.

His illness was not something that needed to be pointed out. It was obvious every time he tried to stand or sit, and was something that was silently registered between us with each effort. While the family continued the charade of not telling him he was dying, Jozsef's own realisation was setting in. He was indeed a very ill man.

Medications were used to compensate his pain as much as possible. As was the case with many people, blocked-up bowels were a side effect of pain medication. The drugs to then assist that issue were not working well, so I was required to assist bowel

discharge by inserting medication into his rectum. The poor old fellow—once you are this ill, there is no privacy anymore. Certainly there was no dignity now, as Jozsef rolled onto his side for me to insert the small tube. I tried to keep the situation light and found myself speaking words I would come to say to many others in following years.

'It all starts off being about food and poo Jozsef, and it all ends up being about food and poo,' I gently joked with him. Working with the dying truly brought home the cycles of life. The things that keep a baby most comfortable at the very beginning are food and the release of their bowels and wind. At the end of life, the questions everyone asks of the dying person are if they are still eating and are their bowels working properly.

It is a relief to everyone when someone who is dying and on strong painkillers finally manages a bowel movement, easing the other pain. This was the case for Jozsef and his family, when he made a dash to the toilet soon after and enjoyed an explosion from his bum. Of course, this brought me relief too; not only because my client was more comfortable, but also because I had succeeded in this procedure on my first-ever attempt.

One of his sons lived in a nearby suburb and visited daily. Another lived interstate. His daughter lived overseas. Each day Jozsef and his son would chat for a little while, mostly about the business pages of the newspaper, until Jozsef became too tired. This didn't take long; his health was deteriorating rapidly. I liked his son, despite no strong connection between us. I had no reason to not like him though. When I mentioned to Jozsef later that his son was a nice man, he replied, 'He is only interested in my

money.' Preferring to take people as I find them, I tried to stop this comment influencing my own opinion of his son.

Over the next few weeks my client shared many stories with me, mostly about the love of his work. He and his wife Gizela had been holocaust survivors, managing to find their way to Australia on their release. Stories about his time in the camps came out in fragments, but I didn't push it. I was there to listen, not to determine what he should share. It was obvious that life was made easier for both he and Gizela by not discussing it. Trying to empathise as much as possible, I hated to think how much pain they were both carrying. My heart went out to them.

Jozsef and I fell into an easy association and stories on other subjects flowed well. We had similar senses of humour and were both fairly quiet by nature. We liked each other. The generation gap made little difference and we came to share a strong conversational flow, strengthened daily. All the while Gizela would come in with food, constantly encouraging Jozsef to eat. Despite him being hardly able to eat at all, she cooked huge quantities. Part of this was possibly habit, but a part was denial.

The family had somehow also convinced the doctor not to tell Jozsef that he was dying. It was denial by consensus. Not only were they not telling him the truth about his condition and inevitable decline, the family were trying to convince him he was getting better. 'Come on Jozsef, eat up. You'll be getting better in no time,' Gizela would say repeatedly. My heart went out to her. To be so scared of the truth must have been a huge burden.

Jozsef was down to just a tub of yoghurt a day and incredibly weak. He was no longer even able to walk to the lounge room with assistance, but they were still telling him he would be better

in no time. I stayed silent on the topic, until Jozsef brought it up with me directly.

Gizela had just left the room. Jozsef was sitting back and I was giving him a foot massage, something he had never had in his life before but had come to enjoy during the previous weeks. I loved pampering my clients and perhaps this is why we grew close. A lot of the conversations I had with them were while I was massaging feet, brushing hair, scratching backs or filing their nails.

'I *am* dying, aren't I Bronnie?' he asked, when she was out of the room.

I looked at him with kindness and nodded. 'Yes Jozsef, you are.'

He nodded with gratitude and relief at being told the truth. After my experience with Stella's family, there was no way I was going to be anything but honest. He looked out the window for some time, the foot massage continued in comfortable silence.

'Thank you. Thank you for telling me the truth,' he finally replied in his thick accent. I smiled gently and nodded. Silence lingered for another moment or two. Then he spoke again. 'They just can't handle it,' he said of his family. 'Gizela can't face the pain of talking with me about it. She will be okay. She just can't talk about it.'

He was peaceful in knowing his situation and I was peaceful in having been honest. He continued, 'I don't have long left, do I?'

'I don't think so, Jozsef.'

'Weeks, months?' he questioned.

'I really don't know, but I would guess it is only weeks or days. That's my feeling, but I really don't know,' I told him honestly. He nodded and looked out the window again.

Very few people can truly predict *exactly* when someone is going to pass, unless the person is obviously in their last few days. But it was a question clients and families always asked, sometimes repeatedly. By now I was starting to gauge the decline of people, aware of seeing how quickly things could change. Often clients would appear to pick up again briefly, before the final turn home. The success of my role as a carer really came down to me working intuitively. It was on that basis I had answered Jozsef's question, even if somewhat reluctantly. I just didn't want to lie and say he had months left, when there was no way he did.

The foot massage was finished and I sat looking out the window too. He broke the silence after a time. 'I wish I hadn't worked so hard.' Waiting, I let him continue. 'I loved my work, I really loved it. That's why I worked so hard—that and to provide for my family and their family.'

'Well, that's a beautiful thing then. Why regret it?'

He explained that his regrets were partly for his family, who had seen so little of him for most of their life in Australia, but it was mostly because he had never given them a chance to know him. 'I was too scared to let my feelings show. I worked and worked and kept the family at a distance. They didn't deserve to be so alone. I wish they really knew me.'

Jozsef said he hadn't really known himself until recent years, so questioned how they could have stood a chance of knowing him anyway. His eyes expressed deep sadness as we talked about the patterns of relationships and how difficult it is to break them. He felt he had missed the opportunity to create loving warmth with his children. The only example he had ever set was how to earn and value money. 'What is the point of that now?' he sighed.

'Well,' I tried to reason. 'You have done what you intended. You are leaving them with a comfortable life. You have provided for them as you wanted to.'

A solitary tear ran down his cheek. 'But they don't know me. They don't *know* me.' I looked at him lovingly. 'And I want them to,' he said, as the tears started to flow. I sat in silence as he cried.

After a while I suggested it wasn't too late, but he disagreed. He was too frail to speak for long periods now, so that alone would make it difficult. He also admitted to not knowing how to talk with them about such depth of feelings. I offered to get Gizela and his son, to include them in the current conversation, saying perhaps it might be easier with me there. He shook his head and dried his tears. 'No. It is too late. Let's not tell them I know. It is easier for them, thinking the way they do. I know I am dying. It is okay.'

Jozsef was near the age my own dear grandmother had been when she passed on. Although each of their lives had been vastly different, there was something about being with someone of that age I was comfortable with. My Gran and I used to be able to talk about death very easily though. She said it was easier with me than with some of her own children.

She and her twin brother had been the eldest of eleven children. Gran was only thirteen when her mother died, then raised all of the other children herself. Her father was a 'hard man', as she put it. She also called him a 'mongrel' at other times. He provided food but little else, especially not love, she said.

A year or so after her mother had died, the youngest of her siblings also passed away, a little one called Charlotte. After raising all of those younger siblings, Gran went on to raise seven children of her own, my mother included. When I was born with a mass of

dark curls and big inquisitive eyes, Gran saw the spitting image of Charlotte in me. As a result, we shared a close connection from my first day.

We would all be so excited when she came to visit us. Kids love visitors and we were no different. Gran stood no taller than five feet, but was a dynamic, amazing woman. She'd had to be with her upbringing. The love she gave me was unconditional and always completely accepting. A fine example of this, among many, was when my mother was overseas with her own twin sister, having a well-deserved holiday. My father worked away a few days a week, so Gran came to look after us.

I was twelve at the time, soon to be thirteen and in my first year of high school at the convent. The school was hidden behind ten-foot double-brick walls and run by nuns, some of who were lovely women. The headmistress was a tough cookie though, and not so affectionately known as 'Iron Face'. The older students had warned us off her from Day One. Now as a grown woman and not influenced by such rumours, I can admit she may have been a lovely woman underneath that tough exterior. I want to believe that anyway. But she ran a tight ship and in my years there, I must say, I didn't see her smile once.

In that first year of high school, I was looking for something different and found myself hanging out with two of the toughest girls in the class for a short while. I was a pretty good kid and had been rarely noticed by the headmistress prior to this, which suited me just fine.

Climbing a tree and sneaking over the fence in our lunchbreak, we raced downtown and made our way into a store, where we each stole a pair of earrings with our initials on them. Gaining

confidence from such easy success, we then ventured into the next store and shoplifted some lip gloss. Rubbing my sweet-tasting lips together and laughing about how good the stuff was, I felt a large hand on my shoulder with a voice saying, 'I'll have that, thank you.'

With legs almost paralysed by fear, I was led into the store manager's office with one of the other girls. Our other friend had run off. They called the headmistress of the school, who was waiting for us on our hesitant return. She tapped the ruler in her hand. 'Into my office,' she ordered firmly.

'Yes Sister,' we replied humbly, in unison. If we had tails, they would have been between our legs by this time.

The deal the store did with the school was that no charges would be laid, but we had to go home and tell our parents ourselves what we had done. Our parents were then to call the headmistress and confirm we had told them. We were banned from sport for a whole term; being mad sports lovers, this devastated us both. Despite being a Christian nun, she also hit across the backs of our legs with a thick wooden ruler a dozen times.

With Mum overseas and Dad home for the end of the week, I was terrified. Being a sensitive, gentle kid, I was scared of anyone with a big voice. But Gran was there too, so I took her aside. With my bottom lip trembling, I told her what I had done. She sat listening, not interrupting, not reacting. She waited until I had finished, by which time I was bawling my eyes out.

'Well, are you going to do it again?' she asked.

'No Gran. I promise,' I solemnly declared.

'Have you learnt your lesson here?'

'Yes Gran, I have. I won't do it again,' I assured her.

'Okay,' she finally said. 'Well, let's not tell your father and I will ring the school for you tomorrow.' And that was it. Bless her. The fear I had experienced from the incident itself was so enormous that not only did I never shoplift again, I was never even capable of returning to that particular store.

Years later when high school was completed, I left the country town I grew up in. Not able to wait to spread my wings, I accepted the first job offered. It was a banking role near Gran's place in the city, five hours away. Living with my Gran and aunt was the most practical option.

At eighteen, fresh off the farm and out of convent schooling, it was not surprising that I was open to new opportunities. When my mother guessed later that year I was no longer a virgin, she was horrified and almost ready to disown me. She was unable to believe that a good girl, with common sense, could be so easily swayed. It was Gran who fixed things again, telling my mum to lighten up as times had changed and that I was still a good girl in my own way. My connection with both of these wonderful women continued to strengthen from that point on.

When I discovered the world of alcohol and came home drunk to Gran's, it was she who left a bucket beside my bed, just in case. She was wise, accepting and a hugely positive role in my life. She was also relieved when I announced at a reasonably young age that alcohol was just not for me.

Gran outlived all of her brothers and sisters, which was heartbreaking for her as they had been like her own children. We would write to each other from wherever I was and share our lives as an open book. I shared her sadness at losing her last sister and her

frustrations in growing older, gradually losing her independence. Seeing her slow down over the years was heartbreaking for me too, as I had to face the fact that she wasn't going to be around forever.

I started to find it hard to hold back tears whenever we would talk. So I openly told her how much I loved her and how much I was going to miss her when her time came. After that, we were able to speak about death with candid honesty. I am so glad we did. With no denial of what lay ahead, we savoured every conversation and she was able to share her thoughts about passing with me. Gran was ready to go for years before she did.

Returning from a few years overseas, I couldn't wait to see her. The changes were huge. With hair now totally white, she walked with a stick and had shrunk even more. My Gran was now an old, old lady. She was in her nineties, but still the amazing woman I knew. Her mind was clear and our conversations continued on with great satisfaction for another year or so.

The phone call came on a Monday, while I was at work in one of my last bank jobs, managing the local branch. She had passed away the night before, dying in her sleep. My world fell from beneath me and I shut the office door. With my head between my arms on the desk, I sobbed in farewell to my beloved, darling grandmother and for my loss. 'Oh Gran, oh Gran, oh Gran,' I cried, weeping into my own arms.

Leaving work early for home, bleary-eyed and too sad to think clearly, I stopped at the mailbox. Flicking through the letters and bills half-numb, I halted in amazement. There among them was a card from my little Gran. She had posted it Friday and had died naturally in her sleep on Sunday night. A torrent of tears flowed

from both sorrow and joy as I held the card to my heart, sobbing but almost laughing at the same time.

I was so grateful for our connection and the courage to talk about death honestly. There was nothing left unsaid. She knew I loved her and I knew she loved me, even more so as I read the beautiful words she had written: *I love you dearly, my darling. You are so often in my thoughts. May sunshine follow you all the days of your life Bron. Love Gran.*

The thought of her dying may have brought me tears before her departure. I certainly cried after the event. But there was peace too, knowing we had faced what inevitably happens to everyone, with honesty and openness. That peace stays with me still. Her face smiles back at me from a photo frame on my desk. Years on, while there are days I still miss her dearly, I have no doubt that honesty gave us a relationship so special and positive that it continues to shape me in the best possible ways.

But it wasn't so easy for my dear client, Jozsef. Such honesty was too painful for him and his family. My heart ached, feeling his pain and frustration. What that dear man must have experienced in his life, I hated to imagine. Gizela continued to come in with enormous meals, encouraging Jozsef to eat up. He would smile gently at her and decline the meal every time.

I was the main day carer and other carers came in the evening. We knew each other. It was comfortable and easy for him, especially now he was able to open up, at least to me. So it was with surprise and sadness I learnt I was being replaced. His son had been complaining of the costs of care. Explaining to his son that his father only had a matter of a week or two left, he chose to make other plans anyway, saying Jozsef could live on for ages.

Finding an illegal worker willing to do the job for next to nothing was the solution.

Pleading with Gizela to convince their son otherwise was no use. Their minds were made up. There was other work waiting for me elsewhere. That wasn't the issue. It was that Jozsef had finally been able to talk and he was comfortable with me. Surely his happiness should have been the priority for the last week or two of his life. I hated to think of how impersonal the alternative might be, especially as he was no longer able to speak a lot, due to weakness and breathing difficulties. I felt for the new carer too, and the language difficulties they would face together.

It was out of my hands. I had to trust that these events were also a part of Jozsef's life journey. How can any of us know what another is here to learn? We can't. So with a hug and a smile that said more than words were ever going to, we said our goodbye. Pausing at the doorway of his room one last time, I looked at him again. We each smiled the same way at each other, saying nothing but saying so much.

Driving away from his home, knowing he would be staring out of the window in his own thoughts by now, my tears flowed. This role was exposing me to people I would have never met otherwise. I loved what was shared and learnt through each other, as heartbreaking as it often was.

Jozsef's granddaughter called me about a week later to tell me he had died the night before. I was glad for him. His illness would never have allowed him any more quality of life.

Contemplating all that had unfolded, I found only blessings. Learning through these dear people before they died was a rare

gift, one I was immensely grateful for. We will all die, but this work was reminding me we all have a choice about how to live in the meantime too.

Seeing the anguish Jozsef experienced from not being able to express his feelings left me determined to always try and be brave enough to share mine. My walls of privacy were being eroded and I began to wonder why we are all so afraid of being open and honest. Of course, we do it to avoid pain that may come as a result of our honesty. But those walls we create bring pain of their own, by stopping others from knowing who we truly are. Watching the tears fall down that lovely old man's face, as he longed to be known and understood, changed me forever.

After receiving the phone call about Jozsef's passing, I sat in a park near the beach, absorbing the surroundings. Children were playing everywhere. I watched how naturally they all shared their feelings. If they liked someone, they said so. If they were sad, they cried, released it, and were then happy again. They didn't know how to suppress their feelings. It was beautiful to watch the honest expressions. It was also refreshing to see how they all played and worked on things together.

We have created a society where adults are so insular and apart. Working together, expressing their feelings, and being joyous were the natural states of the children I watched. While it made me sad that as adults we have lost the ability to be completely open, it also brought me hope. If we were once like those children, as we all would have been to varying degrees, then perhaps we could learn to be so again.

I made a clear decision in the park there by the beach. I was not going to find myself ever regretting things as dear Jozsef had. It was time to be more courageous and to start expressing my feelings more.

The walls around my heart were of no use anymore. The process of dismantling them was, at last, now underway.

The buzzer rang, bringing me out of a snug sleep in my latest abode. After slipping some cover on my feet and wrapping myself in a robe, I headed upstairs to attend to Jude. Words that may appear as a grunt to an untrained ear were uttered, indicating she needed repositioning. Her leg was in pain. Once Jude was comfortable and smiling again, I turned off her lamp, wished her sweet dreams again, and headed back down to the comfort of a beautiful bed.

Jude and I were brought together by word of mouth. Someone in the songwriting circuit knew I worked as a carer and lived as a house-sitter, so had passed my phone number on. The majority of my palliative clients so far had been elderly or past middle age. Most were dying of cancer-related illnesses, but not all.

Jude's illness was a motor neurone disease. She was only 44. Her husband and daughter, a delightful nine-year-old with curly auburn hair and a precious smile, were loving people. So was Jude.

By the time I came to be her carer, they were fed up with agencies who sent different people all the time. Jude's needs were many and quite specific, particularly understanding her comfort and deteriorating speech. The desire for one main carer had become their priority, just before I came to fill those shoes.

Other carers were employed to cover my time off and, thankfully, I now had enough experience to train them.

No longer able to support her own weight, we used a hydraulic hoist to move Jude to her wheelchair and bed. Each day I saw her abilities lessen and was glad to have arrived while she could still communicate reasonably well, as it enabled me to translate the grunts that came later.

Jude came from a very wealthy family and was under extreme pressure as a young adult to marry well and live the life expected of her. Her first car was a luxury model, costing more than most people's annual salary. She had not stepped foot inside a regular department store until she was in her mid-twenties. Designer clothes were all she knew. Her upbringing guaranteed this.

Yet she had always been very creative and down-to-earth. The simple life was all she wanted, she told me, but her parents insisted she go to university. They gave her the choice of studying economics or law. There was no other choice, despite her brief mention of wanting to study art. So, under pressure and expectation, Jude chose law. Her choice was based on the idea that one day her parents would die and she might then be able to put her knowledge into a better cause, either the arts or community welfare.

Things didn't work out that way, though. Her father had passed on and it was likely she would die before her mother. Regardless, she was no longer capable of working.

Her love of the arts saw her fall in love with Edward, an artist himself. They both told of an instant attraction that had obviously not dwindled at all in the years since. Although both had been a little shy at first, the strength of their mutual attraction gave them the confidence to be brave.

In no time, they were in love and the whole world fell away as they became each other's world. Jude's family was horrified by her choice, as Edward had been raised in a lower-class family and was happy with a simple life, pursuing his art. He was actually quite a successful artist. But he was not a white-collar worker, so this was never going to be good enough for Jude's parents.

Sadly, she was forced to choose between her parents and Edward, so she chose Edward. 'Of course!' she laughed. It was never a decision. She loved Edward with all of her heart, as he did her. Jude was then completely ostracised by her family. A few close friends remained from earlier years. But she moved on to a different, happier and more accepting world, so enjoyed new friendships that had entered her life too.

A few years later, Jude and Edward welcomed their little girl, Layla, into the world. Every effort was made again to reconcile with her parents. She wanted them to know their granddaughter. Jude's father finally conceded and came to enjoy a relationship of love and quality with his dear granddaughter before he died. His relationship with Jude also improved. While he was polite to Edward, Jude's father still struggled with the knowledge that an artist had won his daughter's heart, so they did not have a close relationship. However, as a result of his relationship with Layla, Jude's father purchased a harbourside mansion for them all, much to her mother's disgust.

Things had been moving along well, they told me, until Jude had started to become clumsy, to the point where it could not be ignored anymore. These stories were told in unison by Jude and Edward. I suspected this would have been the case, even if she were not struggling with illness. They were so close as a couple.

Their love was both inspiring and heartbreaking to witness. These were people of my own generation.

Hours of deep, honest conversation unfolded between us all, including the acceptance of death at such a young age. It is easy for us all to assume we will live forever, but life doesn't work that way. Through the storms of life, some young ones will always go. Like flowers blossoming, not yet ripened into fruit, they will be taken away before they can realise their full potential. Others will make it through to full maturity and go out at their best. Still others will live past their prime and slowly degenerate over the years.

While it is often referred to as dying before their time, it isn't really. We all go when it is our own time. Millions of people are not destined to live a long life. It is the assumption we will all live forever, or at least until a very advanced age, that brings so much shock and despair when someone young dies. But this is actually a natural part of life for all species. Some young ones die, some middle-aged ones die, and others don't die until old age. Of course, it is heartbreaking to see young ones go when it appears they have their whole lives ahead of them. Some of my own friends have lost young children and I have witnessed their heartache firsthand. But these children or young adults were not destined to be here for a long life. They came in, shone brightly, and are remembered with purity for all they gave during their brief time.

Even though Jude had made it through to her forties in good health, it would have been easy to think how wrong it was that such a good woman was now dying aged only 44. But she and Edward had come to accept this, both just grateful they had met and known the love they did. They had also been blessed by

bringing Layla into the world. In that regard, Jude was peaceful in a way, knowing she'd had the honour of guiding this delightful little girl through her first nine years. Naturally, there was also heartache as she would not be around to watch her little girl become a woman, as well as for the pain Layla would suffer in losing her mum. It helped Jude a lot to know that her daughter had a loving dad to help her on her way.

By this time, Jude had lost her independence and mobility completely, but her greatest frustration was that she was losing her speech. The thing she feared most, she told me one night as I repositioned her in bed, was when she would no longer be able to convey she was in pain and would have to lie there tolerating it. I thought about how difficult life can be and how different all of our lessons are. What an awful way to see your last weeks or months through—to have consciousness but no ability to communicate. On top of that, to be lying in pain but with no-one realising or knowing the exact way to ease it. This must happen the world over for sufferers of other diseases too, like stroke or brain injuries. It certainly put my own life back into perspective.

Each day I heard Jude's speech deteriorating a little more. Some days it was still reasonably good, quite audible. Other days, it was only because we knew each other and I worked intuitively that I was able to follow what she was saying. On days like that, Jude sometimes resorted to using a special computer program she had. Between the eyes of some glasses she wore, made especially for such use, there was a laser that would reach letters on the computer screen. Jude would pause on the letter long enough for it to type the letter, then move onto the next one. Then after a couple of letters were written, a choice of words would appear,

and so on. It was a slow process for sure, but at least it enabled her to be understood. I silently thanked those who had created such an opportunity for her by developing this program. The time would come soon enough though, when Jude would no longer be able to move her head to even do this.

So on the good days, I listened as much as possible while she talked. There was much she wanted to convey. Holding a juice to her lips I waited, as Jude took one slow sip at a time, enabling her to keep talking. There was one point in particular she needed to make, and did so over and over. 'We need to be brave enough to express our feelings,' she said. Very fitting, I thought, considering my own journey so far.

Even though she had lost the relationship with her mother by choosing to be with Edward, she was happy knowing she'd actually been brave enough to make that choice, one she'd never regretted.

She wanted to share her feelings with her mother now. Acknowledging that such an opportunity might never come, Jude had written to her mother some time before. The letter waited in Edward's office drawer. Jude's mum knew of the illness, but she was still in a place of stubbornness, unable to forgive and visit her dying daughter.

'We must learn to express our feelings *now*,' Jude emphasised. 'Not when it is too late. None of us ever know when it will be too late. Tell people you love them. Tell them you appreciate them. If they can't accept your honesty or react in a different way to how you hoped, it doesn't matter. What matters is you have told them.'

Jude said this was just as important for those who were passing as for those who would remain behind. Those passing need to know everything has been said. It brings peace, she said. If those

who are left behind can muster the courage to express their feelings honestly too, then they will not carry this regret to their own passing. Nor will they have to carry guilt, after someone they loved has passed and things have gone unsaid.

What had made getting this point across even more important for Jude was that she had lost a friend unexpectedly a year earlier. It had shaken her world up immensely. Tracey had been an effervescent woman, the life of any gathering. She was well loved by everyone due to her enormous heart, and held a total lack of judgement towards others.

'It is too easy to get caught up in life and not spend as much time with people you love, whether that be family or friends. But we really must get back to relationships and honesty. People don't realise how important this is, until they are dying themselves or living with the guilt after someone else has died,' Jude told me.

She said that there was no need for guilt at all, if we have truly made our best efforts to express our feelings and to spend time with those we love. But we need to stop thinking that those we love will be around forever. Life is over in a flash, she reminded me. Jude was grateful she'd had time to say her own goodbyes, but emphasised that not everyone receives the blessing of time to express these feelings at the end. In fact millions don't, as they depart suddenly and unexpectedly.

Even though expressing her love for Edward had ruined her relationship with her mother, Jude reinforced being glad she'd had the courage to be honest. Not only did it allow her to know the fullness of love she and Edward still shared, she was peaceful knowing she had been true to her own heart. It also showed her how much she was under the control of her parents until then,

particularly her mother. If a relationship is based on control, she said, how can the other person ever have a truly healthy relationship with that person anyway? If this was the only kind of relationship on offer, she decided she was better off without it.

Having tried to communicate with her mother, Jude said she would be dying free of guilt. She'd had the courage to express herself. Thankfully, the same had been the case for her with her friend Tracey. Jude had always been very honest and though the shock of losing Tracey had been enormous, she was again guilt-free. Only a few days before losing her friend, they'd had lunch together. When they hugged goodbye, Jude had told Tracey how much she loved her and valued their friendship.

It was not the case for most of her friend's family or other friends. Tracey had been such a bright person that it was hard to ever imagine she would not be around. Then her life was taken suddenly in a car crash. A year later, the ripples of shock and guilt still continued just as strongly in Jude's circle of friends.

'She had changed people's lives and they had never told her so. Tracey wasn't the sort to need the confirmation, no. But people have to live with their own lack of effort afterwards and I have seen this guilt turn toxic in people since, as they battle with how differently they could have done things.' I could understand this.

'Also,' Jude continued, 'Tracey didn't need the validation but she would have loved to have heard that encouragement from others. She was so open and delightful. And now she is gone.'

I naturally agreed with her that sharing feelings and honesty was important. Life was certainly throwing those lessons at me already, even more so now as Jude and I talked. She was a gorgeous woman, still naturally elegant, despite not being able to hold herself

well anymore. Her mouth drooled at times and her clothing had to be more practical than stylish. But her spirit and remnants of who she once was still remained, with their own radiance.

In agreement with her opinions, I shared my thoughts. 'Yes. So much is held back by pride, apathy, fear of reprisal or humiliation. But it also takes a lot of courage sometimes Jude, and we are not always strong enough to do this.'

'Yes, it takes courage, Bronnie,' Jude continued. 'That's the point I am trying to make. It takes courage to express your feelings, particularly if you are not doing okay and need assistance, or if you've never expressed honest feelings to someone you love and don't know how it will be received. But the more you practise sharing your feelings, whatever they are, the better things become. Pride is such a waste of time. Honestly, look at me now. I can't even wipe my own bum. What does it matter? We are all human. We are allowed to be vulnerable too. It is a part of the process.'

Leading up to the time at Jude and Edward's, life had been particularly hard for me. I decided to share some of this with Jude. It was relevant to how hard it could be at times to share such depth of feelings.

The palliative work had slowed down for a while. It often came in waves of all or nothing. This didn't bother me as my creative work benefited then instead. After almost two months of hardly any work though, things were starting to get a bit difficult financially and there was no work on the horizon. Any money I earned was usually invested back into my creative work in some way, so there was not a lot to fall back on. Having survived it before, I was never too perturbed about this.

House-sits likewise came and went. Sometimes I would have very little notice of where I was going next, only knowing when owners were due to return. Usually another house would present itself at the last minute. During stronger times, I did enjoy this risk and excitement to a degree. The adrenalin certainly flowed. It happened relatively often. Someone would call me in a panic, asking if I could look after their home starting tomorrow, for example, as they had been called away suddenly. Such occasions would save us both.

Sometimes clients worked in with other friends in the house-sit network, to ensure they wouldn't miss out on me being available. They would plan to go on holidays the same day their friends were coming back, knowing I would then be free. On those occasions, I was sometimes booked for months in advance, which made life much easier.

There were times, though, when I was unable to find anywhere to look after for a few days, or a week or two, in between scheduled house-sits. So I would leave town and visit someone in the country, enjoying the break. Or if I had a specific client who I didn't want to leave, I would crash out in a friend's spare room or on their couch temporarily. Initially this was easy enough, but after a few years of this pattern, I began to dread asking and felt like I was wearing out my welcome. My friends said I wasn't. They supported me and understood it wasn't forever. When I'd had settled home bases years earlier, my homes always had visitors. But learning to receive was so much harder than giving.

Having to repeatedly ask friends if I could stay left me feeling absolutely hopeless. While I had worked through a lot of my past wounds, enabling me to have compassion for others, it was still

taking a lot of work and pain to transform my thoughts towards myself. Decades of negative patterns were being undone and it was a slow process to change my thinking completely. New and positive seeds had been planted and, in many ways, were sprouting in my life. But I was yet to eradicate all of the old seeds, so they would still sometimes surface.

On this particular occasion the work had stopped ages before, my money had pretty much run out, so I was feeling hopeless all over again. I rang my closest friend and asked if I could stay. She was going through something herself and it was just not possible. This wasn't about me. It was her stuff and her life. Because of my thinking and emotional state at the time though, I took it as a total rejection and felt even worse for having put her in the position of having to say no. I reluctantly called a few other friends but sorry, full house with interstate visitors, another away, and another consumed in a work project that needed total concentration. I didn't have the money to leave town and get back without borrowing some, which would have just left me feeling more hopeless anyway. So I accepted I would be sleeping in my car.

This wasn't an issue years earlier, when I had the jeep and was on the road travelling. In fact, there was nowhere I would have preferred sleeping than in the back of that old car, on the comfy bed in there. But not in the rice bubble, a car so small I couldn't even straighten my legs when I tried to lie down. It was also without curtains or privacy and was the middle of winter.

I couldn't think of anyone I could call without feeling even worse by asking. As much as I was scared to be sleeping so exposed on the city streets, I was sort of resigned to the fact that this is what a hopeless person has to do sometimes.

Driving around before dark, I checked out a few options of places that looked relatively safe and suitable. I also needed to consider I might need to go to the toilet. Freaking people out by piddling on their front lawn in the middle of the night was not the kind of attention I needed, on top of my existing emotions.

The days are long when you are homeless and trying to stay invisible. You have to be up and out of the way at sunrise and cannot settle in until everyone else has gone home and settled in themselves. In the meantime of course, you are homeless so you can't go home and wait. They were long days. The nights were worse: very uncomfortable, achingly cold and unbearably lonely.

One night I went to a cafe where I heard some music, staying as late as possible on my one cup of tea. I felt like the old man in the Ralph McTell song, *Streets of London*, trying to keep his one cup of tea going all night to enable him to stay indoors. How ironic, I thought, that this had been one of the very first songs I ever learnt on the guitar.

At sunrise I would wait for the council toilets near the beach to open. Then I would wash, clean my teeth and use the toilet, all the while enduring the scowls of the council worker who had just unlocked the door. I think he saw me as a camper, freeloading or something. But there was nothing he could have thought of me that was any worse than what I was already thinking of myself, so I really didn't care.

One of the blessings already in place from my time with the dying was that I genuinely didn't care what others thought of me anymore. As it was, I had enough to deal with in my own head.

Another night I went to the Hare Krishna's 'Feed the Hungry' program. Whenever I had money, I had been generous with it.

Joining the queue now, I found more irony in my situation. If I ever saw them trying to raise funds, I had always thrown ten or twenty dollars into their bucket for this very program. I liked the Hare Krishnas. They were vegetarians, played happy music, and fed hungry people. That was enough for me. But now I was a recipient of their goodwill and it was rather humbling.

One morning I sat on a rock by the harbour, praying for strength, endurance and a miracle. Just then, a pod of dolphins came by and one flipped itself out of the water in play. My life felt so serious until that moment, so it gave me a little bit of hope again.

Suddenly I thought of some friends who lived further out and decided to call them, to ask if I could stay. They were always kind people, but my sense of unworthiness and hopelessness had not enabled me to ask any more people for help, or even think of anyone else I could ask. I had not had the courage to express my feelings, even though I could have very honestly just said to these friends, 'Look, I'm feeling crap, but may I please come and stay for a little while?'

With a brighter resolve, I went for a walk around the harbour. Before I had the opportunity to call the friends, my phone rang and it was Edward, asking if I was free to come and be Jude's carer and could I please begin immediately? There was also a fully self-contained apartment on the property, if needed. That night I lay with legs fully outstretched again, no longer aching with cramps and cold. A snug duvet kept me warm after my nurturing bath. I'd eaten a healthy meal with three delightful people and I was earning money again!

I could look at this time and say it happened because the work or the house-sits dried up. That's what happened physically, but it

was a situation I had created through my own lack of self-worth and by nurturing old seeds that no longer served me. Obviously there were new seeds being sewn too, because at other times I was starting to live an abundant, amazing lifestyle. Learning to undo the old patterns in my head was taking time though, and I had made it harder for myself by not being able to ask for help.

When another lull in house-sitting appeared at a later date, the first thing I did was phone the friends I had thought of that morning with the dolphins. They welcomed me into their spare room with loving joy and excitement. Allowing goodness in was possible again. I was still learning how to express my feelings, but I *was* getting there.

I told Jude how openness was a learning curve for me, as I had become so shut down in the past. I appreciated her opinion and the opportunity to discuss this so honestly. 'We all need the reminder, Bronnie. Everyone holds things in that need to be said, whether it is what people want to hear or not. We must express our feelings in order to grow. It helps everyone in one way or another, even if they don't realise it. Honesty works.'

Smiling, I looked out at the boats on the harbour. The full moon shone soothingly on the water. Jude returned to the subject of guilt and how we have a choice to not create it, by honestly expressing our feelings as they surface. Then it is never too late, especially if someone we love passes unexpectedly. It also enables us to be free of constraints, as we once were as children. We should never feel guilty for expressing our feelings and we should never make someone else feel guilty, if they have found the courage to do so.

After a couple of months with Jude, her deterioration became so severe she was admitted into a palliative care hospice. Work was flowing for me again back at the agency and a decent length house-sit had presented itself. I dropped into the hospice to see Jude, pleased to be able to catch up with Edward and Layla too. Sitting on the other side of the bed was a lady I'd never met, but it took no time to recognise the likeness between Jude and her mother.

Edward had taken it on his own initiative to deliver Jude's letter to her mother, before his beloved Jude died. By now she was unable to talk, but it had all been said in the letter. Jude had told her mother she had loved her, and still did. She wrote of happy memories she held dear and of the positive things she had learnt from her mum. The letter contained nothing negative, as Jude hated guilt and wanted her mother to know she was loved, despite the sadness of their relationship. Jude's mother had turned up unexpectedly a few days later and had been back every day since, holding Jude's hand, watching as her daughter's life drew to a close.

After chatting to Jude for a while I kissed her cheek, saying my final goodbye with loving thanks. 'See you when I get there, Jude,' I said through tears and a smile. She grunted back and her eyes smiled, even though her mouth no longer could.

Edward and Layla walked me out to the rice bubble, both of them holding one of my hands. We were all tearful, with love flowing honestly. Edward told me that Jude's mum had been talking a lot to her and tears had fallen down Jude's cheeks, particularly when she heard her mother say she loved her. Her mother apologised for having been so judgemental. She admitted to being secretly jealous of her daughter and of Jude's courage to

step away from the opinions of society, something that had robbed her of true happiness.

After hugging both Edward and Layla goodbye, I wished them the very best in life ahead. I thought of dear Jude lying there with her mother at her side, and how powerful the force of love really is. My heart was aching but joyful.

An email came a couple of years later from Edward, which was a lovely surprise. Layla and her grandmother had enjoyed some cheerful months of getting to know each other, before the older lady had died. He said she was a different woman by then and reminded him of his beautiful Jude at times. When the estates were settled, Edward and Layla decided to leave the city and move up to the mountains, closer to his father and where the air was cleaner. He had met a new lady a year before and Layla now had a little sister on the way.

My reply included my best of wishes to them all. I was also happy to share with him the things I remembered about Jude, including her smile, her patience with the illness, her acceptance, and her determination to get her points across: that guilt is toxic and expressing our feelings is a necessity for a happy life.

I can still remember sitting beside her bed as the full moon shone on the water, with Jude determined to be heard for as long as her voice would allow. She'd made her point and I now know the joy of expressing my feelings, as honestly as that dolphin showed its joy when it flipped up out of the water.

Gifts in disguise

A few temporary shifts in nursing homes had seen me working with clients suffering from Alzheimer's. Nanci was my first private home, palliative client with this disease.

She had been a gentle woman, the mother of three children and ten grandchildren. Her husband was still about, but rarely came into her room. It was easy to forget he actually lived in the house at all. Nanci's three sisters and two brothers would visit on alternate days, as would a few of her friends, though these visits slowed down over time.

Looking after Nanci was hard, exhausting work. She was restless and very hard to monitor, never wanting to stay in one place for more than one minute, and very distressed much of the time. Moments of peace were few and far between for her and as a result, for me too.

Eventually her anguish became so concerning to everyone, especially her family, that the dosage of her medications was increased. Nanci then slept some of the day. When she was alert, her words and sentences made no sense at all, as is typical of those with Alzheimer's. Parts of one word were mingled with parts of others. You could recognise it as an English dialect at times, but nothing structured, formal or coherent. Still, I treated Nanci as

I did all of my clients, with love and gentleness, chatting to her as I did my job. Sometimes she acknowledged I was in the room, sometimes she was miles away and I could have had ten heads without her noticing.

Occasionally I would shower her when I arrived at eight in the morning, but this was usually the night carer's role. Washing her fell to me if it had been a particularly troublesome night and Nanci was still sleeping when I arrived, which was fine. More often than not though, the showering would be happening when I arrived around eight. Nanci would sometimes smile at me as she sat on the shower chair, while the night carer washed her. However, one particular carer had significantly different methods of care than the rest of us, and insisted that was the way things were done where she came from.

The first incident happened one very cold winter morning. Arriving in Nanci's room, I found her lying naked on her bed, shivering with cold and fully exposed. She had just been showered. During the process, her bowels had opened, leaving a huge pile of faeces under the shower chair. That was nothing new. Clients often experienced this when their backsides were hanging through the opening of the chair, as their bowels recognised it as a toilet seat. These chairs were also used to sit over a toilet, if clients needed an elevated seat.

Nanci was a modest woman from a modest family. Lying there naked without any covering would have been traumatic enough for her, but she was also shivering from cold, looking like a fragile little child. The minute I walked in and saw her like that, I finished drying her off and covered her with a warm blanket as soon as possible. The other carer was in the bathroom, cleaning up the

mess. It was impossible for me not to say I could have cleaned it up later. The priority needed to be the client's comfort, rather than a clean bathroom floor. The night carer's only response was a shrug.

The other incident came while crossing over shifts with the same carer a few weeks later. Generally I don't like to wear a watch and avoid having to be structured by a clock at all, if I can help it. But rather than cause stress by having to rush, if I have to work to a strictly regulated timetable, I tend to leave myself excess time to get to places. This allows me to enjoy the journey more, however long or brief, and to be more present along the way. On this particular morning the traffic had been flowing particularly well, so I arrived earlier than expected.

Following the previous incident, the night carer had taken to showering Nanci even earlier, so I saw none of her procedures. The carer and I actually got along quite well. We had often seen one another during handover of shifts during past years. But the lack of empathy I witnessed from her with Nanci and previous clients had left me struggling to regard her as a caring professional. This increased even more when I walked into the bathroom to say good morning and found dear little Nanci sitting on the shower chair, shivering cold, absolutely freezing, with her teeth chattering.

Asking what was happening, the carer explained that where she was from this is how they showered people. Freezing cold water blasted all over the body for a couple of minutes, followed by a couple of minutes of lovely warm water, followed by another couple of minutes of cold, then warm, but always finishing off with cold. It gets the circulation going she said, which could be right. I wouldn't know and I didn't care, though I did accept that swimming in cold water had often left me feeling very invigorated.

The problem was that it was the middle of winter. Winds howled outside, windows shook, and even indoors, decent layers of clothing were required. This little lady was so ill she was dying. She hardly needed invigoration to go running around the block. Nanci was too frail to do anything by then and just needed to be warm and comfortable. Our job was to attend to her wellbeing, which included her comfort, not having her sit on a shower chair looking completely terrified, so cold her teeth were chattering. In my opinion, the poor darling just needed to be snug and lovingly cared for.

Never one to be terribly forceful, I *can* draw on my strength when required. What triggers this is injustice or cruelty. Speaking gently but honestly to the other carer, my message was received. She accepted that only warm water would be used for the rest of the shower.

The days continued to unfold in a series of routines. That particular night this carer was heading off on holidays and would not be back for a long while. Her replacement was Linda, another carer I had often met in passing. It was always refreshing to come onto a shift after her, as she was pleasant to chat with and her work ethic was high quality. Relieved for our client, I sent out a prayer of thanks.

Nanci continued to speak as incoherently as always. When she was out of bed, she was still restless and agitated most of the time. Due to the increase in her medication, these occasions were not for so long. The sides on her bed were supposed to be up the whole time, but if things were calm, I would lower the railings to remove the barrier between us. Sometimes Nanci would respond well to some pampering, like when I rubbed cream into her legs

or things like that. But even during the calmer moments, if Nanci did speak it was always in the language only Alzheimer's sufferers would understand. There was no clarity or structure, just mumbled syllables that didn't work together. Her speech had been like this for several months before I met her.

After assisting her to the toilet one day, she shuffled back towards the bed holding one of my hands. A tube of something in my other hand slipped to the floor and I laughed, bending down to pick it up. I stood up again, talking to her and laughing. Then as clear as day, looking me straight in the eye, Nanci said, 'I think you're lovely.'

A huge smile broke onto my face and we stood smiling at each other for a minute. I was looking at a totally sane and present woman. At that moment, she knew completely what was going on. So I replied truthfully, 'I think you are too, Nanci.' Her smile grew wider and we hugged, after which we both smiled at each other again.

Her balance wasn't great, so we continued to shuffle back to the bed holding hands. As I sat her on the side and bent to lift her legs up, Nanci came out with a jumbled sentence of Alzheimer's language, one that had no chance of being understood by anyone. She was gone again, but she had been there with me briefly, as clear as day.

No-one will ever convince me otherwise. Alzheimer's sufferers may not know what is going on most of the time, but just because they cannot convey their thoughts clearly and are often very confused, this does not mean they do not absorb some of what is going on. Seeing this firsthand changed my whole perspective on the illness.

A few weeks later I mentioned the incident to Linda, the other carer. A short time later, Linda experienced further clarity from Nanci, though perhaps not so endearing. It was a part of her night shift duties to roll Nanci over every four hours, to avoid bedsores. Often Nanci would be in a deep sleep but it had to be done, doctor's orders. On this particular night, as Linda went to roll her over at about four in the morning, Nanci said very firmly and clearly, 'Don't you dare move me.'

'No worries, Nanci,' Linda replied startled. 'Sweet dreams.' Linda was amazed but left Nanci as she was.

The family came and relieved me for half an hour each day. They were long and exhausting shifts. I welcomed the break. Being in a beach suburb, I would head straight down the hill and stand on a rock shelf looking out to sea. The rocks were partially covered with barnacles and puddles of ocean water, but there were plenty of places to step, allowing me to access the edge of the shelf safely. Breathing in the ocean air, I'd delight in the fresh breeze and vastness of the ocean. Occasionally, there would be another person further along the rocks, further out, right on the point. He would be playing a saxophone. It was magical to observe and hear, such perfect tunes floating across with the rhythm of the ocean. I would stand there spellbound, absorbing it for every possible moment before reluctantly heading back up the hill. The music often sustained me for the rest of the shift.

Naturally I would tell Nanci about it, even if she were completely off in another world. It didn't bother me. My intention was to try and keep her world a little stimulated if I could, by bringing in conversation from the outside world. Nanci's whole world by now was just her bedroom, ensuite and sitting room.

For a couple of months, I mentioned the saxophone man to her, with no response or sign of interest reflected back. Then one day when I returned elated and tried to describe the tune he had played that day (as if you can ever truly describe music through words), Nanci looked me in the eyes and smiled.

As I put some washing away a few minutes later, she started humming a tune. This was usually the time of day when she was most agitated, but instead she hummed for ages. Then as quickly as it had started, it stopped. She was miles away again, uttering incomprehensible syllables. These glimpses of clarity made me grateful I'd kept talking to Nanci all this time, regardless that I usually didn't get the response I would have liked.

Just because someone doesn't respond the way you wish, that doesn't mean you should regret the attempt to express yourself. The reaction of others is their choice, just as our own reactions are no-one else's responsibility.

As my walls were being eroded one brick at a time, the need to fully express myself became increasingly important. Yet, in other ways, it also became less important, since I was becoming less bothered by how I was perceived. In the end, it was mostly about how I perceived myself. I wanted to be courageous and honest in an ongoing way. Learning to be open was starting to feel good, very good in fact.

I understood that just because I was changing in many positive ways, it didn't mean others in my life would embrace this. New patterns were being created, releasing me slowly from my past, beginning to empower me. This was not always well received by others, but I had to be who I was now and not who people had

come to expect me to be. There was a new person being born from within and she wanted to come out, to share her new self.

One particular friendship in my life was feeling very unbalanced and had been for a few years. It was a lesson in boundaries. With all of the changes happening within, including the satisfaction of honest expression, it had come to the point where I finally needed to say how I was feeling. I explained my thoughts with honesty, in the hope they would be understood. It wasn't an attack on the friend, just me sharing what I was feeling about the expectation for me to make all of the effort for our visits, and the imbalance I felt was happening.

We had been friends for a long time. I was sure honesty would get us through. It didn't. It just showed me it was only history and habit that had been holding us together for a long time. My friend lashed out with an anger I had no idea she owned. It was fear and hurt that triggered this. I understood that. But the level of anger that came at me was overwhelming. I realised I didn't actually know this person at all. There was nastiness in her I had never even glimpsed or suspected. When she then severed our connection completely, I accepted her decision and peacefully obliged. It was time to move on.

Either way, I still reflected on our friendship as a beautiful gift for the years it had existed. In the end, only happy memories remained. Letting go of the friendship was relatively painless—I could see no point in having a relationship that did not allow for honesty or balance. None of us are perfect, myself included. I contributed to the breakdown of that friendship too, whether consciously or not. But to be in any sort of relationship where you

do not express yourself, simply to keep the peace, is a relationship ruled by one person and will never be balanced or healthy.

At the other end of the scale, honesty enhanced a different friendship a couple of years later. Life was changing a lot for me. So I would sometimes call, to bounce it off someone who knew me well. But this friend was rarely available, until she needed me again.

It all came to a head one day. Through my weariness, I expressed very honestly how I really needed to lean on her for a while. That truthfulness brought us ten times closer and opened up a beautiful conversation. She shared a lot with me too, and our friendship benefited from mutual respect and emotional maturity. In the end, she was not the kind of person who could be totally reliable and we both came to acknowledge and accept this.

Instead, I came to lean on myself more and rely on longer-term friends. While this released my need of the friendship a little, my friend also had to adjust to me not always being available for her. I wasn't always strong enough to be, nor did I feel the need to play that role anymore. The acceptance of each other's frailties and the courage to be honest with each other brought us even closer on many other levels. These days, the friendship is without pressure from either side.

We don't catch up as often as we used to and our lives are not so entwined, but all relationships go through changes, friendships included. Despite all that unfolded, we are closer friends than ever now. We are honest and totally accepting of each other for who we really are, not who we wanted each other to be. When we do manage to catch up, we both savour the gift of time and understanding we are blessed with.

While expressing feelings may come at a price, as it did with

the first friendship, I know any remaining relationships in my life are now of mature honesty and true quality. Expressing who I am is one of my core driving forces these days. Being honest and opening up also gets easier all the time.

It took a long time to get to this place, but it is immensely freeing. It also enables me to recognise the struggle others go through in trying to do so. When I look at the rewards that come from honest expression, I can only hope others will find that place in themselves one day too.

Nanci's brief response to me, amid the jumbled language she lived with, was one of the most memorable moments ever. Had I not expressed myself to her prior, regardless of expecting a reaction or not, I would never have received such a reward as that moment.

Assuming others know how you feel and that you will always be there are high risks to take. They could be dead in an hour, so could any of us. We risk paying a high price if we take people for granted. Not every day is going to be a happy one. We are all growing and all have hard days, but there are loving thoughts to be shared too. This is why it is imperative to share your feelings honestly and listen to others on a regular basis. It is too easy to get caught up in your own little world and forget.

There is a song by a well-known and loved Australian songwriter and performer, Mick Thomas, that perfectly conveys taking people for granted. It is about getting caught up in life, so much so that the guy in the song wouldn't even notice if his woman changed the colour of her hair or anything else. The main message and line in the song is: *He forgot she was beautiful.*

While the song relates to a guy taking his woman for granted, it can be applied to anyone in our lives. Women take their men for

granted too, no longer seeing their inner or outer beauty. Women don't always recognise that a man shows his love in different ways, like doing things for his partner. Kids take their parents for granted. Parents take their children for granted sometimes. Friends, cousins, brothers, sisters, workmates, grandparents, and members of the community are all taken for granted.

The things we love about others are too often not acknowledged. It takes courage sometimes to speak honestly and we cannot control the reaction of those we share this openness with. We must be sensitive to who they are, as well.

Honesty is rewarded, even if it is not in the way you anticipate. It may come as self-respect, living without guilt when someone has died, richer relationships, unhealthy relationships being relinquished from your life, or in any number of unimagined forms. The longer you delay your honest expression, the less you are honouring the precious gift of your life and others.

No more words of clarity flowed my way from Nanci again. It didn't matter. That momentary blessing I had received was more than enough. Her grandson noticed another moment of clarity when he sang to her one afternoon. Nanci didn't speak, but she looked her grandson in the eye and smiled lovingly at him; not in an Alzheimer's way, but as a grandmother smiling proudly at her grandson, peaceful with the expression he had chosen that day, through his singing.

We can never know the gifts that will flow to us until they arrive, but I am certain of one thing: courage and honesty are *always* rewarded.

REGRET 4:

I wish I'd stayed in touch with my friends

Occasional shifts were done in nursing homes, in between regular clients in their private houses. They were not regular shifts, for which I was grateful. These places were absolutely awful. The clients attended to in nursing homes were not always palliative either, just people in need of some help. Sometimes I was employed simply to be an extra staff member in an existing team, rather than to look after a particular client.

If ever one wants to live in denial about the state of our society, avoid nursing homes. If ever you feel strong enough to look at life honestly, spend some time in one. There are a lot of lonely people in them—a lot. Any of us could become such a patient at any time.

Being exposed to the staff was both devastating and inspiring. Some of those I worked with briefly over the years were wonderful, good-hearted people, obviously working in the right field. Their spirits were bright, their hearts kind. But most nursing homes were understaffed, so they were constantly challenged to spread their good cheer around.

At the other end of the scale were those who had either grown weary and despondent working in the field, or had never had

the enthusiasm in the first place. Empathy goes a long way in life and was very lacking in the team I was placed with on the night I met Doris.

The residents shuffled into the communal dining room on their walking sticks and frames. They were people of relatively comfortable means; it was a private and so-called 'luxurious' nursing home. The decor was lovely, the gardens well maintained, the communal areas clean, but the meals were awful. Everything was pre-cooked outside the home and reheated in the microwave, without taste or enticing aroma. There was nothing nutritious or fresh about any food I saw. Residents placed their orders at the end of the previous week and usually had a plate of something slid in front of them, with no greeting or kindness from the staff.

Seeing a cheerful face, residents would touch my hand to keep me at the table talking. These were regular people whose minds were clear and who loved social interaction. Their bodies were ageing and becoming frail, but that was all. A year or two earlier these same charming, delightful people had been living completely independent lives.

As I returned to the kitchen for another tray of plates, scowls from some of the staff awaited me. I had merely chatted and laughed with some of the residents briefly on my round but this was met with disapproval. I just ignored it. Returning a plate of lamb, I told the head person in a friendly manner, 'Bernie ordered chicken, not lamb.'

She half laughed replying, 'He'll get what he's bloody well given.'

'Come on,' I said, not intimidated by the nonsense. 'Surely we can give him a chicken dish?'

'He'll get lamb or he'll starve,' she said bitterly. I looked at her with compassion for her obvious unhappiness, but with no respect for her manner.

A lovely staff member fell into step with me as I returned the lamb to Bernie. 'Don't worry about her, Bronnie. She's always like that,' Rebecca said.

I smiled, glad for a genuine heart. 'I'm not worried about her at all. It's the residents I care about. They have to live with this treatment, day in and day out.'

Rebecca agreed. 'It used to affect me a lot when I first started here. But now I just do what I can to give them all the kindest treatment possible, within my limitations.'

'Good on you,' I replied with a smile.

She rubbed my back as she walked off in another direction. 'There *are* a few of us who care; not enough, but there are a few.'

When the meals were served and somehow eaten, and the kitchen was clean, some of the staff members went outside for a smoke. A few of us stayed inside and chatted to the departing residents. It was jovial, as a dozen or so people gathered around to share a laugh with us. Their wit and cheerful spirits amazed me; I marvelled at the resilience of these people, who had adapted so well to their new conditions.

Each of the residents had their own room and bathroom. As I did the nightly round of helping people to get dressed for bed, each room revealed some personality of its resident: photos of smiling families, paintings, crocheted rugs and favourite teacups. Some balconies had pot plants on them.

Doris was already dressed in her pink nightdress when I breezed in cheerfully, introducing myself. She just smiled without saying

anything, then looked away. Asking if she was okay, I was met with a flood of tears. Immediately sitting beside her on the bed, I held her in my arms. No words were spoken while she sobbed, holding onto me desperately. I prayed for strength and waited.

When the tears stopped, as quickly as they had started, she reached for her handkerchief. 'Oh, silly me,' she said wiping her eyes. 'Forgive me, sweetheart. I'm just being a silly old woman.'

'What's going on with you?' I asked gently.

Doris sighed, then shared how she had been there for four months and had hardly seen a cheerful face since. She said my smile had set her tears off, which almost made me want to cry. Her one daughter now lived in Japan and while she was in touch fairly often, they were no longer close.

'You never think as a mother nursing your beautiful little girl that anything could ever take away your closeness, but it has. Life has. Not through an argument, mind. Just life and its busyness,' she shared. 'She has her own life now and I've learnt over the years that you just have to let go. I brought her into the world, but we do not own our children. We are just blessed with the role of guiding them until they can fly on their own, and that's what she is doing now.'

I warmed to this dear lady instantly and promised to return in half an hour for a longer chat, if she could stay awake long enough for me to finish my shift. She said she would love that.

Later, Doris sat up in bed talking away. In a chair beside her, I listened. She held my hand the whole time, now and then playing with my fingers or the ring I was wearing, without realising she was doing so. 'I have been dying of loneliness in here, sweetheart. I had heard it was possible and it is. Loneliness can surely kill you.

I get so starved for human touch at times,' she said sadly. My hug had been the first she had had in four months.

She didn't want to burden me with it but I insisted on her continuing. I was genuinely interested in knowing her, so she went on. 'I am missing my friends most of all. Some have died. Some are in situations like me. Some I have lost touch with. I wish I hadn't lost touch with them. You imagine your friends will always be there, but life moves on. Suddenly you find yourself with no-one in the world who understands you or who knows anything about your history.' I suggested we try to reach some of them. She shook her head saying, 'I wouldn't know where to start.'

'I can help,' I offered, as I went on to explain about the internet. It was all very foreign to Doris and she did well to understand it to a degree. At first she declined, worried about my time. Finally though, I convinced her I would love to. Investigative skills were something I enjoyed. During my years in banking, I had worked for a short time in frauds and forgeries and had loved it. She laughed at the comparison. 'Please allow me,' I begged. She agreed with a hopeful, wistful smile.

I wanted to help Doris for a few reasons. I had liked her from that first moment and I *could* help her. I had the skills to try to find her friends but also wanted to help because I knew how she felt. I had also known the crippling pain of long-term loneliness and the longing for understanding.

In earlier times, the pain of my past had worn me down to such a degree that I had withdrawn a long way into myself. It was the misled belief many people experience, that if you keep people out, you keep the pain out. You stop yourself from being hurt even more. If no-one can get close, then no-one can hurt

you anymore either. Of course, the only real way to heal is to let love flow in and through again, not to block it out, but reaching that point can take a long time.

On the surface I was a friendly person to those I came across, but the pain I was carrying still weighed me down. I had definitely grown into a place of compassion for those who had previously thrown cruelty my way. That wasn't the problem.

It was my thoughts of myself that were still taking some time to be transformed. Decades of negative thinking were being undone and, at times, the pain was unbearable. Although I knew intellectually that I was worth more than what I had been conditioned to believe, the healing still had some distance to go emotionally.

Sunday Morning Coming Down became my theme song. Having always loved Kris Kristofferson's music and being quite influenced by him in my own writing, I found that song to be the best expression of my loneliness. Sundays were always the worst. Lucinda Williams wrote a good song about this too, singing: *I can't seem to make it through Sunday.*

It wasn't just Sundays though. Loneliness leaves emptiness in the heart that can physically kill you. The ache is unbearable and the longer it hangs around, the more despair adds to it. Miles of city streets, country roads, and everything in between were walked during those years. Loneliness isn't a lack of people. It is a lack of understanding and acceptance. Huge numbers of people the world over have experienced loneliness in crowded rooms. In fact, these situations often highlight and exacerbate loneliness.

It doesn't matter how many people are around you. If there is no-one available who understands you, or accepts you as who

you are, loneliness can very readily present its agonising self. It is very different from being alone. I had often enjoyed that often in the past. Being alone can mean you are lonely *or* you are happy. Loneliness, though, is a longing for the company of one who understands you. Sometimes being alone and lonely are related, but very often they are not.

The loneliness became so unbearable, the ache in my heart so constant, suicide became an occasional accompanying thought. I didn't want to die at all, of course. I wanted to live. But realising my own worth, not what I had been led to believe, and breaking free of the pain, sometimes took incredible strength to master. Allowing love and happiness to flow back through my life, to even accept I deserved it, was so unbearably difficult at times that the option of suicide felt more appealing.

As the pain and loneliness finally became too much to bear, when I had reached the most painful place of all, my prayers were answered via an act of kindness and understanding. A friend rang at the perfect time. He knew I was going through some hard stuff but he didn't know that at that very moment I was writing my exit letter through slow, heartbroken tears. I was ready to go. I just couldn't live with the constant ache in my heart anymore.

He insisted I didn't have to say a word. I just had to listen. So despite my exhaustion and tears, I reluctantly agreed. Through the phone I heard him begin to play his guitar then the words 'starry, starry night' from Don McLean's song *Vincent* reached my ears as he sang, replacing Vincent with Bronnie. My tears just fell harder. I related so well to the song; its tragedy and pain, the gentle melody telling the story of Vincent Van Gogh's own suffering. When my friend finished, I continued to sob. There

was nothing else I *could* do. He sat patiently in silence, and then I thanked him and hung up the phone still crying. I wasn't capable of more words at the time.

Falling asleep that night, I was totally drained and emotionally exhausted. I acknowledged though, that through my friend's understanding and kind intentions, a small pilot light of hope had at least been reignited. The following evening, a friend from England rang out of the blue. We talked long and honestly, and my strength slowly started to return.

On another very difficult occasion, sometime later but during those same lonesome years, I was pleading and praying for help, trying so hard to be strong. At the time I was driving into town and I hit a bird. It was a decent size and the noise on the windscreen was enough to wake me up. Of course, being an animal lover, this made me feel even more abysmal in a way, but it was a good wake-up call. Life can be over as quickly as that, and did I *really* want mine to be so?

I apologised to the bird's soul and thanked it for the role it had played in my evolution, driving on with more mindfulness. Just then, a piece of classical music came on the radio, lifting me into the most beautiful place. The incredibly delicate sounds soothed me, gently wiping away my heartache. Instead, I was blessed with a magnificent and inspiring moment as the music soared. I decided then that this is what life was about: beautiful moments of purity. That's it, as simple as that. Beautiful moments. And I wanted to live, to experience and acknowledge more of them.

Having previously been to that level of sadness and loneliness, I now understood that the pain Doris was experiencing was real and tangible for her. She was around people at meal times, and here

and there during the day. But she was longing for understanding and acceptance, missing her friends because they were the people who truly understood her. If I could help to ease that pain, then why wouldn't I?

The following week I dropped in to find a list of four names waiting for me in the dear lady's lovely cursive script. Doris told me what she could about the four friends and where they had been living when she had last made contact. We drank tea as she shared their stories with me.

One of the women was easy to locate, but she had suffered a stroke and could no longer talk. Hearing this news, Doris dictated a brief message that her friend's son would read to her. While she was saddened to hear of her friend's state, she was peaceful knowing this message could at least be passed on:

> *Dear Elsie, I am sorry to hear you are not well. Years have flown by. Alison is still living in Japan. I sold the house and am in a nursing home. A young lady is writing this for me. I love you, Elsie. Yours sincerely, Doris*

It was simple, but said everything she wanted to. I called Elsie's son that night and passed the words on. He called me back later telling me how Elsie had smiled in delight. I passed this onto Doris, which then left her with a contented smile.

Over the next few weeks, I managed to find out about another two of her friends. Sadly they had both already passed over. Doris nodded in acceptance of this. Sighing she said, 'Well, it was probably to be expected, sweetheart.'

The pressure to find the last friend left me very determined. Having searched the internet and made numerous phone calls,

things were not looking good. People were friendly and helpful when I called but, 'Sorry. Right name, wrong family,' became a familiar response.

In the meantime, I still visited Doris twice a week. She would always hold one of my hands as soon as I sat down, and for the duration of our conversations. Sometimes insisting I must have better things to do, she would try to rush me off or convince me not to come. When I assured her I was gaining great pleasure from our time too, which I was, I would see the relief on her face and the eagerness for each new visit. There is much to learn from older people, so much history is carried forward with them. How could I not enjoy our delightful conversations? They were fascinating.

A breakthrough finally came while looking for the last friend. I received a phone call from an elderly man who said he had once been Lorraine's neighbour. He told me what suburb the family had moved on to and I was successful in tracking her down. In fact, it was Lorraine herself who answered the phone in her elderly, friendly voice. Explaining who I was and my intention, she gasped in joy and wholeheartedly agreed for me to give Doris her number.

Naturally, I took it straight in to her. Hugging Doris as I grinned, I then handed her the piece of paper with Lorraine's name and number on it. She grabbed me and hugged me again, full of excitement. Signalling for me to bring the phone, I couldn't get it fast enough. Before the number was dialled though, I said I would leave her to her phone call, rather than just sit in on them both. She protested mildly but I could see she really didn't mind. She was too excited. She asked me to stay until the call went through and I agreed. So we exchanged a warm and loving hug goodbye

before I dialled Lorraine's number for her. My heart was beating fast with excitement.

As she held the receiver, Doris's face lit up in joy at the sound of her friend's voice. While Doris's own voice was old and I knew Lorraine's was too, the spirit in that phone call was like two young women. They were laughing in no time and chatting nonstop. I tidied the room up a bit, pottering around, unable to extract myself from this incredible happiness. Eventually though I did leave. At the door, I waved quietly goodbye to Doris, who was radiant. She stopped talking for a moment, asking Lorraine to wait and said to me, 'Thank you, sweetheart. Thank you.' I nodded, smiling so much my face ached. Walking down the corridor I could still hear Doris laughing until the door had closed properly. The smile remained on my face.

It was a glorious day and a swim was beckoning. The sense of delight stayed while I enjoyed the water flowing around me, as I dipped and swam for a couple of hours. At home, just after sunset, I received a phone call from Rebecca, the lovely staff member I had met the night I worked there and had first met Doris.

Dear Doris had passed away later that afternoon in her sleep. Tears of sadness burst instantly, but there was joy too. After all, she had died happy, the dear lady.

It is amazing how a little bit of time can change a person's life. When I think about the lonely woman I met that first night compared to the person I'd hugged goodbye to on her last day, no amount of money could substitute the satisfaction this gave me.

There are thousands of beautiful, but very lonely, people in nursing homes all over the world. There are also many young people whose lives are now confined to nursing homes. Young

or old, a couple of hours a week of a new friendship can make all the difference to these people and to their final chapter. Of course, keeping people out of nursing homes in the first place is ideal, though sadly not always possible. There are many people in homes who shouldn't be there—people just disposed of, in a way. It is heart-wrenching to witness. Giving a bit of time has the potential to change these people's lives immensely.

The timing of Doris' departure was perfect. Simply, it was her time to go and she had been happy. We had played the role we were meant to in each other's lives, and for that I will always be grateful. She was a darling woman.

Lorraine and I met soon after. The phone call between them had gone on for ages, she said. Both had parted with great happiness. We sat under trees at a cafe, talking happily about Doris and life in general, until it was time to drive Lorraine home. It was lovely to have been able to meet her friend. Certainly, it had been beautiful to know Doris too.

Hopefully, our dear friend was also able to meet up with her other friends when she reached the other side.

True friends

The hectic pace of Sydney was wearing me down a bit. No house-sits were on the horizon to keep me there, so I moved down south to experience another chapter in Melbourne. It had been several years since I had left, so it was great to be back enjoying the delights of such a wonderfully creative city and to see old friends. My house-sitting reputation also arrived before I did, so my calendar had bookings again in no time.

The first house I lived in, though, was the holiday house of Marie, my boss at the prenatal centre back in Sydney. It was about an hour south of Melbourne, on the lovely Mornington Peninsula. It had her energy all through it, making me feel at home instantly.

It was autumn. Much of the first couple of weeks was spent walking rugged cliffs, as the water lapped far below. Walking long distances while being rugged up in a big coat and hat, with cold ocean winds gusting by, left me feeling wonderfully alive. Then once snug inside, sitting by an open fire, my cosy evenings were spent writing and playing guitar.

As much as I could have done this forever, I needed an income too, and that's what brought me to caring for Elizabeth. In some ways, her situation was heartbreaking, but I was learning to accept we all have different lessons to learn. What may appear as a tragic

situation to others was also a great opportunity for growth and learning for the person involved.

Working through my own stuff was teaching me to find the gifts in the learning. I was actually coming to find a lot of blessings through my past. I discovered gifts that could not have come to me had I been raised in a perfect home situation, if such a thing really exists. Strength, forgiveness, compassion, kindness and many other lessons had been offered to me through my circumstances, all of which I was not only grateful for but which shaped me into a better person every day.

So I had to detach a little from my clients and accept that I did not know what they were here to learn. For whatever reasons, they had attracted the life they had; it wasn't up to me to save them. I was there to bring them loving care, friendship, acceptance and gentleness in their final weeks. If this helped them to find their peace, as it sometimes did, then it made my work even more satisfying. As they say, it is in giving we receive and I was definitely receiving many blessings in this field.

Working with the dying was an honour too. Through all of their reminiscing and stories, my own life was being transformed. To be exposed at such an age to the insights they discovered was an incredible gift. I was already implementing much of the learning from my clients into my own life by that time, without having to wait until I too was on my deathbed and then regretting the same things. Arriving at each new client's home, I stepped into a whole fresh world of learning for myself, over and over again. Each home was a different classroom, with either new lessons on offer or similar lessons from a different perspective. Either way, I was absorbing a great deal.

Elizabeth was not an elderly woman, only in her mid-fifties. She had been an alcoholic for the past fifteen years and was now dying from an associated illness. While she was still resting on the morning I arrived, her son gave me the run-down on her home and her condition. He also explained that the family had decided not to tell her she was dying. 'Oh boy,' I thought, 'here I go again.'

Through my desire for self-improvement and inner peace, I always tried to live as much as possible in the present moment. In the case of Elizabeth, I realised this was going to be the only way through. If she asked me whether she was dying, I would deal with it at the time, rather than wonder how to deal with it in the meantime. I accepted that she may never ask, but I wasn't going to lie to her.

Confusion and despair surrounded Elizabeth. Her family had removed all alcohol from inside the home, locking it in a cupboard in the garage and helping themselves to it whenever they wished. As Elizabeth was ill and dying, they decided to remove it from her access completely. This was one of the things I found heartbreaking. She was dying anyway, so why put her through the pain of withdrawing on top of everything else? But it wasn't my decision.

Alcoholism in others was something I had been exposed to at too young an age. Then later working in the hospitality industry, on the island and while travelling, I was exposed to it even more. Alcohol doesn't bring out the best in anyone. Not only does it ruin the goodness of the alcoholic, it also ruins families, friendships, careers and the innocence of children exposed to it. That is the case with other drug addictions too. The only true thing that brings out the best in anyone is love.

Alcoholism is also an illness though, and while it is one that can be treated, the sufferer needs ongoing and loving support to break the pattern. It can take them a lot of strength to start believing in themselves and their potential for a better life again. Taking a chronic alcoholic off their addiction, with no loving support or explanation, appeared to be a pretty awful thing to me.

All Elizabeth knew was that she was ill. Her energy was exhausted. She needed assistance with almost everything and her appetite was fading. She was also desperately missing the alcohol. The family had only told her that the doctor advised taking her off the drink 'for a while'. It took some strength for me to not judge them, particularly when I saw them sneaking alcohol into their own bodies regularly, while denying it to a dying woman.

The family had also banned some of her friends from visiting, as they were drinkers. So it was not surprising to see Elizabeth experiencing despair and confusion, having had all of her pleasures removed from her.

She accepted the ban of her drinking friends with quiet resignation, though it had removed more than that from her. Elizabeth had been on the board of a couple of charitable societies before becoming so ill. These friends were her link to the outside world and to her former life.

After six or seven weeks together, her strength was disappearing even more significantly, while her need for rest increased. Elizabeth was quite funny, in an unobtrusive way. Her very dry humour came out at some unexpected moments. Sometimes one of her remarks would come to mind at home after a shift, and I would find myself smiling as I thought of her.

We had grown to like each other and had established workable routines, within the constraints of her illness. One of those was our cup of tea every morning in the sunroom. It was the nicest room in the house by far and, at that time of year, the sun shone in gloriously. While we were in the sunroom one morning, things moved to a new level between us.

'Bronnie, why do you think I am not getting better? I am not drinking but I am still getting weaker by the day. What do you think?' Elizabeth asked.

Looking at her directly and lovingly, I replied with a couple of questions. 'What do *you* think is the reason? I am sure you've thought about it a bit before now?' I was very gentle with her, but needed to know her line of thinking first.

'I dare not say what I am thinking,' she sighed. 'It is too big to grasp. Yet deep down, I know the answer anyway.'

We sat in silence for a while, watching the birds out of the window, the sun warm on us both. 'If I ask you, will you tell me? I really need some honesty here,' she admitted. Lovingly, I nodded.

'Is it what I think?' she asked, her question almost unfinished. I waited, sending her love, seeing if she wanted to go on. She did. 'Oh God, it is,' she said, answering herself with a sigh. 'I am dying, aren't I? Kicking the proverbial bucket. Flying with the angels. Passing on or over or whatever it is. Dying! I am dying. I'm right, aren't I?' With a heart tangled up by her bittersweet question, I slowly nodded.

Silently we both sat watching the birds until Elizabeth was ready to talk again. It was a while before that happened, but I had grown used to comfortable silences with my clients. They had so much to think about and to absorb that sometimes conversation

could just get in the way. There was no need to fill the silence at such times. They would talk when they were ready, which Elizabeth did.

She said she had suspected it for a while and was frustrated by her family's lack of honesty. Taking her friends and social life away was cruel she said, which I somewhat agreed with. Elizabeth understood she wasn't strong enough to go out of the house, but said she would have liked to see her friends from time to time. Acquaintances dropped in sometimes, people the family approved of and trusted to come without alcohol. They were pleasant people, she said, but there was no closeness.

Once we reached this level of honesty, our conversations flowed unhindered. There was no time for holding back, so we found ourselves enjoying each other's company more each day. After years of being so withdrawn, I often surprised myself now by how easily I expressed personal thoughts. With death on her doorstep, Elizabeth too enjoyed the openness of our constant exchanges. Her initial reaction was anger that her family had not told her she was dying. Eventually, it shifted to acceptance. She expressed that the controlling behaviour from her family had possibly been based on fear. For that, she was able to forgive them.

However, she was unable to pretend that she didn't know she was dying, and addressed this with them on one of my days off. It brought them closer, with the family relieved that none of them had had to tell her the big news. It was good for me to hear this and not be under anyone's wrath for my honesty. But they stayed firm—her drinking friends could only contact her by phone. Elizabeth was evolving enormously and became accepting of this, now without resignation. She admitted to me, though not

to her family, that it was probably only drinking that had truly held that circle of friends together anyway.

Drawing on my own experiences, I told Elizabeth that several years earlier my friendships had changed greatly, when I began extracting my life from the pot-smoking world. It had sorted out who my friends truly were and who were mates simply because we shared a smoke together. Some people who I thought were quite good friends were actually not comfortable around me at all, unless I was stoned with them. It didn't make anyone a bad person. It was just that without the shared habit, there was no longer a common denominator to hold our friendship together. So we had drifted off naturally, in entirely different directions.

'I wish I'd stayed in touch with my friends, my real friends,' she said, as I recognised the words. 'My drinking moved me out of those circles. Now, fifteen years later, there is little to connect me with my old friends. They have all moved away anyway.'

While discussing the acquaintances who were allowed to visit, Elizabeth said she wouldn't really call them 'friends'. We spoke about how loosely that word is used at times and how there are so many different levels of friends. I had begun to think of some of my own 'friends' more as warm acquaintances lately. It didn't mean I thought less of them; they were still a blessing in my life. But having been to some pretty dark places in myself, I now understood what a real friend was. It is easy to have a lot of acquaintances and I did love those people for the enjoyable role we played in each other's lives. When it comes to the crunch though, not many people can hang around through the very worst of the pain with someone else. Those who do are truly friends.

'It is about having the right friends for the right occasion I suppose,' Elizabeth pondered. 'I simply don't have the right friends for this occasion, for my departure. Do you know what I mean?'

Agreeing, I shared with her that while it was not at all such a serious scenario as her situation, I had a very clear memory of such an occasion for me: missing the right friends for the right occasion. Because of this memory, I could definitely understand that there are different levels of friendships and associations, and sometimes it is a specific quality of friendship we yearn for, rather than just anyone.

Following my years on the island, I worked for a short time in a printing company in Europe. My co-workers were nice people and I appreciated the opportunities that were presented to me, opening my world up even more. The island community had been like a family though. Whenever any of us went away, on a holiday to the mainland for instance, we would all say how fabulous it was to come home to our family on the island.

New friends were made in Europe, though in hindsight I would now call them pleasant acquaintances. Through these people, I ended up on a trip to the Alps with three others around my age. We had rented a cabin high up in the mountains, with no electricity or running water. It was gorgeous and unlike any terrain of my beloved Australia, which has its own magnificence but is hugely different. I found the Alps overwhelmingly beautiful.

Bathing was done in a flow of water running down the mountain. Despite it being summer, the water was freezing. It was just melting snow, forming a downhill stream. As the water rushed down all around me I sat in its flow, gasping for breath. All the

while, I still enjoyed the magnificent views and felt invigorated. But the water was *absolutely* freezing, biting as it hit me, rushing past.

Whenever I had found the courage to swim in a freezing river or ocean, I'd always felt a bit playful afterwards, a bit like a dog after they've had a bath. They rush around like mad, all crazy and energetic, regardless of whether they've enjoyed the bath or not. That's sort of what bathing in this freezing mountain stream did to me; it left me feeling ridiculously silly afterwards.

So I was a bit off my head with excitement and playfulness after drying off, getting dressed, and returning to the cabin. Carrying on with good-natured humour, entertaining myself immensely, and sharing silly anecdotes with my new friends, I realised that every single one of my jokes was totally lost on them. The worried smiles that said, '*What* is she on about?' told me so in a second. Their puzzled faces just cracked me up even more. At least *I* was enjoying the jokes.

They were happy, nice people. It was just that the humour of our cultures was so different. In an instant, I missed my old friends with a painful longing. They would not only have related to the silliness but would have been cracking up with me, adding their own jokes, turning it all into an even greater laugh.

That evening, after a massive afternoon hike to the top of a mountain, we all sat by the light of lanterns as we ate and chatted pleasantly. Not long after, everyone retired for the night, everyone except me. The hike had been amazing and I was still in a jubilant mood. All I wanted to be doing was sit around with friends and generally have a laugh, to wind up a fantastic day. I certainly didn't want to go to bed just yet. All went quiet, as my companions fell into slumber.

Carrying a lantern into my little room, I placed it on the table and spent the next two hours writing. In the distance I heard bells ringing, as cows moved about in the night. I smiled in bliss that here I was, in a gorgeous little cabin, writing by lantern light, high up in the Alps, and listening to the sound of distant cow bells. It was a world away from my own. While I was overwhelmed by the peace of the moment, I missed my old friends terribly.

It was a perfect night but with the wrong people. There were plenty of reasons to like each of my companions on this trip, and I did. But I was experiencing a very special moment and wanted to be sharing it with the right people, with friends who truly knew me. Of course, that was never going to happen. So I savoured the blessing of the moment all to myself instead.

I now knew what Elizabeth was talking about, when she said she wished she had the right friends around. Sometimes there are just particular people who understand you, no matter what—and these are old friends. It was like that for me that night in the Alps and it was like that now for Elizabeth, as she began accepting that her life was coming to a close.

When her doctor came to visit, I asked him privately if it would make any difference to Elizabeth's condition if she were still drinking. He shook his head. 'No, she's on the home straight now, regardless. I told her family that if she wants a little brandy of an evening to allow it. Are they not?' he asked me. I shook my head. He restated it would make little difference now.

Later I spoke to her family quietly about it. It was still a no. They would definitely not be giving her any drink and explained why. It seems that the Elizabeth I was spending time with and the Elizabeth they knew when she had been drinking were two

entirely different personalities. In fact, they couldn't believe what a pleasant person she was again now, as they hadn't seen this side of her for at least fifteen years.

Over the next couple of weeks, I asked her more about her drinking habit if she brought it up. Elizabeth said that as much as she was still craving the drink, she was kind of glad to remember who she was before alcohol had taken over her life.

It had begun easily enough. She'd always had a few wines with the family at dinner and had done so for years with no problem. Then she became active socially, being on the boards of various charities. She admitted that many people she met did not drink excessively at all, but she had been drawn to those who did. She didn't feel noticed at home anymore, but felt like her presence mattered to these new friends. Now that she was feeling clearer, she realised they were all just as needy as her, seeking validation through that circle of friends and their drinking.

Elizabeth said alcohol gave her confidence, or when she was drunk she thought it did. But she became outspoken, loud, and eventually quite bitter and nasty to others. This is what had caused her to lose her original circle of old friends. They had tried to reach her with love and support, trying to help her see her own demise, something they were watching with heartache. But she had been arrogant with them all, eventually pushing every last one of them away.

To her drunken mind, this only validated just how loyal her new friends were. They didn't judge her habit; but of course, this was because they were drinking too. Another reason for her drinking, that she had justified to herself, was that at least her family now noticed her. While it may not have been for a positive

reason, at least she didn't feel ignored like she used to, before she had started drinking excessively. Her loss of control ensured they had to start paying attention.

The more Elizabeth's capabilities declined due to alcoholism, the more her family had to help her, and the worse she eventually began to feel. It had begun with enjoying their attention, but in the end she was incapable of helping herself. This lack of control left her feeling even more insecure and negative. So while in the early days she was hurt about her family not valuing her presence or opinion, in the end she came to truly depend on them and hated herself for it. This just perpetuated the cycle of low self-esteem.

'You know, not everyone *wants* to get well either, Bronnie, and for a long time I didn't. The role of the sick person gave me an identity. Obviously, I was holding myself back from being a better person. I was getting attention, while trying to fool myself it made me happier than being courageous and well.' This admission from Elizabeth came with the hindsight of a woman who was on a fast track to wisdom. Being dry for almost three months and facing the fact that she was dying was changing her enormously.

Knowing Elizabeth's full and honest story about her addiction also helped me to understand her and her family more. In the end, their severe actions had actually helped her to become a better person again. While I may not have acted in such a closed and secretive fashion, I came to respect they were really trying to help her and themselves—and they were successful in doing so. Part of that success, though, was Elizabeth herself. Facing her death had made her look at life very differently and she had courageously embraced her learning.

During her last two weeks, I watched some extraordinary

healing unfold between Elizabeth and her family. One of the most beautiful things I was learning through palliative care was to never underestimate anyone's capacity for learning. The peace I witnessed Elizabeth find was something I had also seen in previous clients. It was very gratifying.

About a week before she died, I spoke with her husband and one of her sons about Elizabeth's regret of losing her old friends. I wondered if it might not be too late to reach some of them, even if they could just speak on the phone. By now there was no concern about friends sneaking alcohol to Elizabeth. It was the least of everyone's concerns. She was too ill. Her comfort was all that mattered and as the family had healed so much, they immediately jumped to the idea.

A couple of days later, two beautiful, healthy and lovely women came into Elizabeth's room, just after I had sat her up comfortably and offered her some tea. One of them was now living in the mountains outside of the city, about an hour away. The other had flown to Melbourne from the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, as soon as she had heard the news. Now they sat around Elizabeth's bed, talking with her, holding hands and smiling.

As I walked out of the room, leaving them to their privacy, I heard Elizabeth apologise to them both and their instant forgiveness. It was past. It didn't matter, they said. Elizabeth's husband, Roger, and I then sat out in the kitchen, both teary but delighted.

The friends stayed for a couple of hours, by which time Elizabeth was both exhilarated and completely exhausted. She fell into a deep sleep instantly and I had no chance to chat with

her before going home. When I returned a couple of days later, she was very weak, but wanted to talk.

'Wasn't that wonderful? Oh, to see their faces again,' she smiled with delight. Unable to lift her head off the pillows now, she looked across to me sitting beside her.

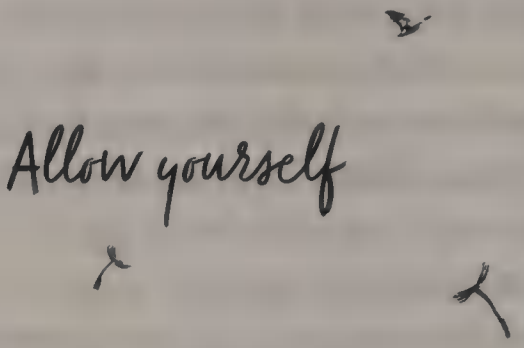
'It was beautiful,' I told her.

'Don't lose touch with the friends you value most, Bronnie. Those who accept you as you are, and who know you very well, are worth more than anything in the end. This is a woman speaking from experience,' she insisted lightly, smiling at me through her pain. 'Don't let life get in the way. Just always know where to find them and let them know you appreciate them in the meantime. Don't be afraid to be vulnerable either. I wasted precious time not letting them all know what a mess I was.' Elizabeth had forgiven herself and was able to let go of her own judgement. She had found her peace and she had found her friends.

When her last morning came, I was adding some moisture to her lips. Her mouth was no longer producing saliva properly and she was struggling to speak, not that she had the energy to. As I finished, she looked up at me smiling, then mouthed the words 'thank you'. Looking at her, I returned the same gratitude with a smile. Then I kissed her on the forehead and held her hand for a moment. She squeezed back.

Her room was full of people who loved her. All her family was there, as were the two women I had met a few days earlier. I stepped back, allowing all their love to cocoon her.

Elizabeth departed this Earth not only surrounded by love, but knowing her presence had been valued enormously and that her friends knew she loved them too.



As far as work went, looking after Harry was the easiest time I ever had. Not only was he a delightful person, but his family insisted on doing everything. Three of Harry's five daughters lived in the same suburb and would bring his main meals over most days, and one of his sons insisted on caring for his dad himself. Questioning the need for me to be there at all, the daughters and other sons assured me they definitely wanted me there.

This meant that much of my time was spent reading or writing. There is only so much housework to be done in an already clean and tidy home, with its only tenant bedridden. I did create a couple of delicious soup recipes in his kitchen, which I managed to sneak into Harry somehow.

He had bushy eyebrows, hairy ears, a red face, and an honest laugh. We liked each other immediately. Within the very first minute of meeting, we had both cracked a joke. It was an easy, natural association from the start.

His son, Brian, was a different story. He was very highly strung. Harry and Brian had fallen out years ago and, while contact had remained between them, their bond was never quite the same. The rest of the family explained it as being Brian's fault. I wasn't there all those years ago, nor had I walked in either Harry or Brian's

shoes, so I couldn't tell. It didn't matter to me either way, but it *was* obvious that Brian was trying to make up for lost time, by insisting he be his father's primary carer.

Brian interrupted any attempt I made to help Harry. By now, I was very good at finding the right position for a client's comfort. It was an intuitive thing and one many clients commented on. Family often rearranged pillows and supports out of kindness, not realising how sensitive a person's body is at this time and how the slightest adjustment can undo the only tiny bit of comfort they have.

When his son reluctantly went off to work every day for a few hours, the first thing I would do was get Harry comfortable again. If there was a tiny moment of time during the day when I could attend to him without being hounded out by his son, literally, the first thing Harry would ask was for me to quickly adjust his pillows.

Each afternoon we had a few hours together before the family arrived back en masse for dinner, even though by now their dad was hardly eating. Those hours were wonderful and what Harry affectionately called 'the peace hours'. While I attended to his physical needs, we would chat and laugh. This was usually followed by a cup of tea and some more chat.

Harry had lost his wife twenty years earlier but had come to continue living his life well. He had enjoyed his work, becoming even busier on retiring through joining a couple of sporting and social clubs. While his illness was terminal, prior to this he had experienced amazing health for his whole life.

'I respected the gift of health I was given,' Harry told me, 'by staying active and not believing some quota of years saying

I should be acting this way or that. People make themselves old before their time.' Despite having a terminal illness, Harry was the fittest-looking man of eighty years I had ever seen. The illness was certainly starting to wear him down, but evidence of his prior fitness was still apparent. Massaging his legs, for example, muscle tone from all of his walking could still be seen and felt.

'When you're retired and your children are raising their own children, the need for friends is even more important,' Harry said. 'So when my wife died, God rest her soul, I joined the rowing club. Then I joined a bushwalking club. I don't know how I ever had time to work!'

Harry very much believed in the importance of extended family, that grandparents are an integral part of children's lives and should be given plenty of opportunity to spend time with them. It was obvious from his relationships with his grandchildren, who visited him daily, that he had a very positive and loving influence on them all.

'My family comes first, but you need people your own age too. If it weren't for the friends I've made through the clubs, I would have been a very lonely old person. I wouldn't have been lonely for company, as I have my children and grandchildren, but lonely for like-minded company of people my own age.'

Hours were spent chatting in his room, until the late afternoon sun would warn us that the peace hours were almost over. The family would soon be descending on us again, but Harry always talked for as long as he could. He said he didn't understand why people left it too late to realise the importance of friends. Also, while it was beautiful when elderly people still managed to hold a loving and respected position within their family, he grew

frustrated that so many of them hadn't left time for friendships along the way too.

'They'll realise it too late,' he insisted. 'But it's not just my generation. I look at the younger ones too, who get so caught up and busy, not taking just a little bit of time out for themselves now and then, to do things that make them happy on an individual basis. They lose who they really are completely. A little time with friends reminds them of who they are when they are not mum, dad, sister, brother, or even employee. Do you understand what I am saying?'

Agreeing that I had seen plenty of people go down that road, I also said I had seen others who had maintained just a slight bit of time out for themselves and were much happier people. They were also much better company to be around.

'Exactly!' He laughed, slapping the bed in agreement. 'Good friendships stimulate us. The beauty of friendship is that these people take us as we are, based on the things we have in common. Friendship is about being accepted for who you are, not as someone else wants you to be, like a partner or family sometimes tries for. We must maintain our friendships, my dear girl.'

From the stream of visitors who came to visit Harry regularly, it was obvious this man walked his talk. His friends were jovial people, bringing great joy with them. Equally respectful of his illness though, they accepted that sometimes he was resting and could not be disturbed.

On another afternoon, Harry asked me about my own friendships. I filled him in on my close friends and explained how some of my other friendships were changing lately, as I was.

'Well, that's natural too,' he said. 'Friends will come and go throughout life. That's why we should value them while they are here. Sometimes, you simply finish learning or sharing what you were meant to through each other. Others will stay the distance, and that history and understanding is a comforting thing when you're at the end of the road.'

During these talks, we both agreed that women approach friendship very differently to men. Women value friendships in a stronger way emotionally—their friendships grow closer with a lot of talk about emotional things. Men need friendships for talking too, he said, but they do this best when they are doing things together, like playing tennis, cycling, or doing something active. Men enjoy friendships where they can work things out, resolve problems, whether physical or emotional, and this often happens best when they are active.

'Like building a fence around a paddock together,' I suggested.

Harry cracked up laughing. 'My, my. You can take the girl out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the girl. Yes, a very rural example, Bronnie, but exactly. Building a fence or doing something manual together is a bonding thing for men.'

He carried on laughing and said if I ever wanted to bond with a good-looking man, all I had to do was to help him to build a fence. I told him I'd keep it in mind.

Sharing some of his favourite stories about mateship with me, Harry reinforced the blessings of the friendships still existing. Every day, lovely friends visited him. They were now operating a roster among themselves, so as not to exhaust him. That way, everyone still had a chance to spend time with Harry. It was loyal and wonderful.

We both admitted that, through these peace hours, we were each receiving a new friendship into our lives—each other. It frustrated him to know I was out in another part of the house for the rest of the day, just reading or writing, when I could be in his room chatting. In total agreement, I laughed. But he understood, as I did, Brian's need to make amends and his desire to assist his father. Harry didn't want Brian to be carrying any guilt, though he was sure he still would. So he was happy to go with it and allow his son to feel needed during their last weeks together. 'Even if he can't arrange the pillows well,' he sighed.

Harry was philosophical about his illness and what was to come. He had lived his life to the full and was ready to see what lay beyond. While we did speak about his approaching passing sometimes, he still steered many of our conversations to the subject of friends: the memories, the value of them, and the necessity of them for happiness and acceptance. He also encouraged me to share some of my favourite memories with him about my friendships so far. 'Start with one from your childhood. Let's hear where you're coming from,' he said, then laughed in delight when my story began in a rural setting, a paddock of wheat.

By the time I was twelve, we had moved from a cattle and lucerne farm, to a sheep and wheat farm. It was miles from town, under a magnificent huge sky. About a year later my first dog disappeared suddenly, when she was seven. We think it may have been a snake's bite, as we never found her. The farm was so large. It devastated me. A few months later, my folks bought me a new dog. She was a little white Maltese terrier, who failed to realise that she was supposed to be a house dog. Instead, she spent her days

chasing sheep dogs (the border collies and kelpies), over paddocks near and far.

My closest friend throughout my high school years and for a long time after was Fiona. Although she lived in town, much of our time was spent out at the farm. I stayed in town at her parents' place a bit too, particularly as we grew a little older and there were boys to be kissed.

One of the main things that linked Fiona and me over the years was our love of walking. I cannot think how many miles we ended up walking together over the decades of our friendship: beaches, rainforests, city streets, foreign countries, bush tracks, you name it. It all started with walking those paddocks of wheat.

As usual, my dog and a couple of the other dogs came along with us. It was not unusual to turn around and see a cat or two also following. While we girls stuck to the track that led to the paddocks furthest away, the dogs would run through the wheat. This was fine while the wheat was low but as it grew, my little dog became invisible. Fiona and I witnessed the most beautiful comedy sketch on that day.

Following the big dogs, which we could see clearly above the tallest sections of crop, was a trail of movement in the wheat behind, as my little dog ran blindly after the big dogs. Every now and then, the movement would stop. A little white head would pop up and look around, like a submarine telescope coming out of the water, until it spotted the other dogs. It then disappeared below again into the wheat, blazing another trail of movement in the new direction. Then the movement would stop, up would pop the little white head, spot the target again, disappear below and run on. This went on for ages until, every time we saw the little

white head pop up and look around, Fiona and I would break into hysterical teenage giggling all over again. Our cheeks ached from laughing. As tears ran down our faces, we leaned on each other, holding the other up before spotting the dog popping up yet again, then doubling over in laughter even more. In the end, we could hardly stand up.

Sharing this simple but precious memory took me back to the value of friendship in an instant. Harry and I laughed together, as I missed that innocence of youth and the carefree, uninhibited laughter I used to share with Fiona. 'Where is she now?' Harry asked. I went on to explain that she was living in another country and we had lost touch. Life had moved on, I said, and there were now others in my life who I was closer to. Other factors had also affected our friendship: other people, but also changing tastes and gradual differences in lifestyles. Harry agreed that you can't go back, but maybe life would bring our paths close again. Having already observed many cycles in life, I agreed it was possible. But either way it didn't matter. I valued the memories and wished Fiona well, silently thanking her for the learning and friendship we had once shared.

Many of my best memories of friendships were of walking, talking and laughing. Over the next week or two, I shared stories from some of these other friendships with Harry. He had also been a keen walker and shared some of his own with me, of places he'd walked and friends he had shared the experiences with. I could imagine any group being brightened by Harry's laughter as they walked. It made me smile at the thought and when he asked what I was smiling at, I was happy to tell him. Harry agreed they had always shared some great laughs while walking.

As it happened, I was to leave Harry the following week to go on a long walk myself. I hadn't been sure if he would still be alive when I had booked it. So while I was looking forward to getting out of the city, I was also a little sad to be leaving him, not sure if he would still be here when I returned. When I told Harry what I was doing though, he wholeheartedly agreed and said he would be there with me in spirit, whether he was alive or not.

The walk was in a remote area and was held each year, always ending at the same lake. Each time a different tributary was followed. This particular year it was starting on some farms where the very mouth of a river began. We would follow that river, much of it now just dry riverbeds, and eventually end up at the lake.

The concept of the walk was to give the participants the opportunity to heal with the Earth, as we walked the paths trodden by ancient people. Rivers were like thoroughfares back then, where tribes would live and walk along their banks, from one place to the next. An Aboriginal Elder blessed us as we all took part in a cleansing smoking ceremony, then off we went, walking for six days.

There were about a dozen of us. We each fell into our own rhythm. Some walked in groups and talked all the way. Others meandered in and out of conversations. Some stopped and took photos of everything, some of us walked more alone. Each night, a couple of volunteers would turn up with the trailer carrying our gear and we'd establish a camp. Then a communal dinner was prepared around a peaceful campfire, while friendships formed under a magnificent blanket of stars.

With every footstep, my connection with the Earth increased. While I enjoyed conversations when we stopped for a break, I found more enjoyment in walking alone and my pace ensured

this anyway. Having done so much walking in the past, my natural rhythm carried me ahead of the main group. One other walker, the wise and loving soul who'd originally started these walks, was always ahead of me, also walking to his own rhythm.

The time alone, just walking on and on, was great for finding clarity again. I realised I didn't want to keep house-sitting for much longer. Something in me was starting to think about having my own kitchen again. All the moving I had once loved was becoming exhausting. A new seed was planted, not with big fanfare, just a quiet acceptance that some things were changing. I walked on peacefully.

It is rare to be able to walk so far in modern times, as land is now separated by ownership. Thankfully, this was all approved beforehand, so we walked across farm after farm without any problem. In the modern rush of life, it is very easy to be unaware of the Earth beneath our feet. Most of us feel a connection with the Earth when we stop and absorb the beauty of nature. But to be able to walk for six days unhindered, left me feeling a connection with the Earth I hadn't known was missing, despite all of my time previously spent in blissful appreciation of the planet.

Along the way, we discovered carvings from ancient people and marvelled at magnificent red gums, hundreds of years old. There were intricate carvings, as well as indentations where canoes had been crafted from their bark. This evidence of past people, whose tribes were now long lost, was both inspiring and heartbreaking. The energy in certain places was incredibly strong too and I understood why it was a walk intended for healing.

On top of this, much of the farmland we crossed reminded me of where I had grown up. Even the smell of sheep poo brought a

flood of memories. I loved being in the dry, dusty climate again, even if only temporarily. With every footstep, my fitness improved and I dreamed of returning to a world where walking was the main means of transport. It just made more sense to me than all of the rush and bustle of modern life.

Finding a cooling waterhole to have a swim in was a welcome relief one day, when I had somehow lost the group briefly. Stripping off and swimming in this clean, refreshing water was rejuvenating. The water cleansed my spirit as much as my body.

The landscape changed constantly as we walked from about eight in the morning until five or so each afternoon, then set up camp. Other signs of previous life dotted our path too. An old cart that had once become bogged in the river was now a part of the dry landscape and possibly had been for over a hundred years. A stone cabin with no roof told of river dwellers in other times. The best was when we saw the numerous tree carvings and realised what a unique history lesson we were all being blessed with, confirming the lives of those ancient people whose footsteps we now followed.

After six full days of walking and about eighty kilometres covered, we arrived weary but exhilarated. It was with great sadness I said farewell to the other walkers, with even greater sadness that the walk had finished. The following day I walked for another five hours around the dry lake itself, as I just couldn't get out of walking mode. A small music festival followed a few days later, which was organised with as much reverence as the walk. So I hung around for that and then headed back to Melbourne.

Thankfully, Harry had not yet passed, so I was able to spend a little more time with him. During the ten days I was away though, the disease had taken over his body and I found him looking

quite emaciated. All of the tone had left his once muscular legs and his big round face was gaunt with loose skin. He was still Harry though, a delightful, beautiful man.

The intensity of Brian's desperation to look after his father had increased enormously. He was even more controlling and would only leave the house for an hour maximum, each afternoon. I was grateful that both Harry and I had already appreciated those peace hours before I went away, as they were hardly on offer anymore. In addition to Brian's obsessive behaviour, Harry was sleeping much more anyway.

As life would have it, Brian was called away unexpectedly one morning and had to reluctantly hand the care over to me. Thankfully it was when Harry was at his brightest—not that his brightest was bright anymore. But he was awake and capable of talking a little at least.

At his request, I told him all about the walk and the insights I'd had into myself while I was away. He asked about the other walkers as well, and any positive changes they'd noticed in themselves or that I had noticed. There was much to share.

'And what are you doing this week in regard to friends, Bronnie?' he enquired in his weakening voice. 'What time are you giving this week to spend with good quality friends? That's what I want to know.' I laughed at his persistence on the subject, and said there would be plenty of time to catch up with other friends later. Right now I wanted to enjoy my time with him, Harry, who was also my friend.

'It's not enough, my dear girl. You are doing just what others do. Surely you have learnt by now that you must take time out for you too. Find some balance and make time for your friends

regularly. Do it for yourself even more than for them. We need our friends.' Harry looked at me sternly with a look of warning, but we both knew there was love behind his insistence.

He was right. I needed to maintain some time out with friends regularly, rather than be working twelve-hour shifts and catching up with them all later. As much as I loved the work and sometimes shared wonderful laughter with the clients and their families, it was a pretty serious world I was living in. Being around dying people and the sadness of their families needed to be balanced with some lightness that only friends could provide. Joy was missing from my life and it was only now I was able to truly acknowledge this to myself.

'You're right, Harry,' I admitted. He smiled and put his arms up for a hug. I leant down on the bed and embraced him, smiling.

'It's not just about staying in touch with your friends, my dear girl. It is about giving yourself the gift of their company. You understand this, don't you?' he asked, with both words and eyes.

Nodding with conviction I replied, 'Yes Harry, I do.' Leaving him to his rest a little while later, I appreciated the point he had made and the direct honesty shared.

Harry was blessed with a smooth passing. He died in his sleep a few nights later. Calling to let me know, his daughter thanked me sincerely. As I said to her, Harry gave a lot to me too. It had been my pleasure to know him.

'Allow yourself time with your friends,' I still hear him say. The words of that dear man with the bushy eyebrows, red face and big smile live on still.

REGRET 5:

I wish I had let myself be happier

Having been an executive in a global corporation, Rosemary was a woman ahead of her time. She had moved up the ranks long before women were ever seen in those roles. Prior to this, she had lived according to society's expectations and married young. Unfortunately, physical and mental abuse came with her marriage. When she was left close to death after one particular beating, it was time to escape for good. Despite this being a very valid reason to leave a marriage, divorce was still a scandal. So to uphold the family reputation in a town where their name was well known, Rosemary moved to the city to start afresh.

Life had hardened her heart and thinking. She found self-validation and family approval through her success in a male-dominated world. Consideration of another relationship never crossed her mind again. Instead, Rosemary moved up the ranks with fierce determination, a high IQ, and a lot of hard work, until she was the first woman in her state to hold such a high level of management.

Used to telling people what to do, Rosemary enjoyed the power her intimidating manner gave her. This behaviour carried over to her treatment of carers. She was going through one after another, never happy with any of them, until I arrived. She liked me because

I had a banking background, which in her eyes exempted me from being a fool. This way of thinking was certainly not one I resonated with, but I had nothing to prove anymore. I figured she could judge me by whatever made her happy. After all, she was in her eighties and dying. Rosemary insisted on keeping me as her primary carer.

The mornings were particularly bad with her bossy moods and nastiness. Developing an increasingly strong sense of my own self, I tolerated it up to a point, but knew there had to be a limit. When her mood turned especially nasty and personal one day, I gave Rosemary an ultimatum: be kinder or I was out of there. She screamed for me to go, to get out of her house, saying even nastier things than before, while sitting on the side of her bed.

While she was screaming at me, I just went and sat next to her. 'Go then. Get out,' she kept yelling, pointing to the door. I sat, sending her loving kindness, waiting for her outburst to subside. Silence followed. We both sat there for another minute or so, saying nothing, but sitting close enough to be leaning on each other. 'Finished?' I asked, smiling gently.

'For now,' she huffed. I nodded, saying nothing. Silence continued. Finally, I just put my arm around her, kissed her on the cheek and went out the kitchen, returning a few minutes later with a pot of tea. Rosemary was still sitting in the same position, looking like a lost little girl.

Helping her up off the bed, we moved across to the settee in her room, where the tea was waiting. Rosemary sat and looked up at me, smiling. I placed a lovely rug over her legs, then sat myself down too. 'I'm so scared and lonely. Please don't leave me,' she said. 'I feel safe with you.'

'I'm not going anywhere if you treat me respectfully. I'm here for you,' I told her sincerely.

Rosemary smiled like a little girl desperately in need of love. 'Stay then, please. I want you to stay.' Nodding, I kissed her on the cheek again and squeezed her hand, as she gave me a huge smile.

From that point on, things were better between us. She spoke of her past, which helped me to understand her more, and of how she had always pushed people away. Having known that pattern in myself for a long time, and the benefits of breaking free of it, I explained that it wasn't too late to let people in. Rosemary said she didn't know how, but she wanted to try and be nicer.

Her illness was slow to take hold but there were definitely signs of it spreading daily, particularly with her increasing weakness. While I could see it, Rosemary was still in occasional denial. Making plans for me to do her books and get all of her investment portfolios in order, she would talk in detail about this and that. I just listened, knowing it would never happen. Rosemary explained how she was going to spend a few hours with me to get started on it all, when she had the energy. I had seen this before, where people continued to make plans towards their future, while in the meantime their strength was disappearing more each day.

She also insisted on me making her appointments around town, ensuring I made the calls from her bedroom phone, where she could listen to every word I said and butt in constantly, controlling the whole conversation. I'd then have to reschedule them, not cancel them, one at a time. There was no denying Rosemary had an incredibly strong love of control. While I was happy to do certain unnecessary things for her, I refused outright at other times—like

being unwilling to waste my time and energy looking for things we had already looked for in every single inch of her home.

Each day saw her emotional walls breaking down more and our closeness increasing. Rosemary's relatives lived far away, but telephoned regularly. Quite a few friends were frequent visitors, as were former business associates. Mostly though, it was a pretty quiet home with a lovely garden we would enjoy together.

While watching me from her wheelchair nearby as I put some linen away one afternoon, Rosemary told me to stop humming. 'I hate that you're happy all the time and always humming,' she declared miserably. I finished what I was doing, closed the linen cupboard door, turned around and looked at her with amusement. 'Well, it's true. You're always humming and you're always happy. I wish you'd just be miserable sometimes.'

This was so typical of Rosemary that it didn't surprise me at all. I wasn't always happy, but when I was it gave her something to moan about. Instead of responding verbally I just looked at her, then did a pirouette, poked my tongue out, and left the room laughing. When I came back into the room shortly after, she was smiling with mischief and acceptance. Never did she condemn my positive moods again.

'Why are you happy?' Rosemary asked one morning soon after. 'I mean, not just today, but in general. Why are you happy?' I smiled at the question, thinking how far I had come myself to be even asked such a question. Considering what I had been going through in my own life while caring for Rosemary, it was rather poignant.

'Because happiness is a choice, Rosemary, and one I try to make every day. Some days I can't. Like you, I've had a hard life;

in different ways, but still hard. But rather than dwelling on what's wrong and how hard I've done it, I try to find the blessings in each day and appreciate the moment I am in, as much as I can,' I told her honestly. 'We have the freedom to choose what we focus on. I try to choose the positive stuff, like getting to know you, like doing work I love, not being under pressure to reach sales targets, and appreciating my health and every day of being alive.' Rosemary smiled, looking at me intensely, absorbing my words.

What she didn't know was that while I was caring for her, I had also been dealing with illness of my own. Sometime prior, I had had a minor operation to remove a melanoma. When the specialist called me with the results, he told me they were open to doubt and a larger operation had to be done immediately. I told him I would think about it, particularly after reading the lab report which contradicted his opinion somewhat.

'There is nothing to think about,' he had stated adamantly, 'you *must* have this operation or you could be dead in a year.' Again, I told him I would think about it.

I had already experienced deep learning through my body, which isn't surprising since the body is where our past is stored. All of our pain and joy manifests there in one way or another. Having managed to relieve myself of smaller ailments in the past, by healing various painful emotions, I felt a huge gift of healing was on offer.

Having enough of my own fear to deal with though, I was only able to share the situation with one or two people. It was going to take all of my strength to stay focused on what I wanted, which was health. I couldn't risk taking on other people's opinions or

fears. These may have been intended with love, but there was not one inch of space for anyone else's fear on this healing journey.

Things certainly turned dark for a while. My throat became bitterly raw and painful, making me cringe even when sipping tea. Awareness increased of how much suppressed anger and expression I still carried. A lot of past stuff surfaced from the depths. Having the courage to express myself emotionally, to release things from the deepest levels, became paramount.

New aches and pains left me feeling like I had been thrown against a stone wall repeatedly. All sorts of new sensations surfaced over the following month or more, none of which were pleasant, as I surrendered to whatever called for release.

At one stage, it became so emotionally painful that I ended up welcoming the thought of dying, asking the illness to take me away. I couldn't live with the turmoil and pain that had been my companion for as long as I could remember. Memories of my family's voices made me want to scream. Increasingly amplified, their repeated opinions mocking me, laughing at me, turned into raging monsters in my mind. As echoes of the past twisted and tormented me, I had to find my ground, stand strong, and realise my worth against old beliefs and patterns of conditioning. I continued to search for courage and release, sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

When I had to seriously contemplate my whole life and accept that, despite my efforts, I *may* actually pass away from this illness and not live to an old age, I reached a point where I found an amazing peace. Realising I had already lived an incredible life, including having the courage to honour my own heart and calling,

allowed me to look my death in the face and accept either outcome. The peace that followed this acceptance changed everything.

While continuing with my usual meditation practice, I also worked through various healing books and visualisation techniques. Numerous shifts started to occur within. Eventually, I reached a stage where I felt the worst was behind me. Something significant but unnameable shifted. I was on the road to wellness.

A lovely house-sit was offered in a rambling little cottage, covered in vines and hidden away behind a high fence. It was in a fairly affluent suburb, but was almost invisible. I loved it. Soaking in a bath had always been a bit of a lifesaver. This house had an enormous one. Being in such a congenial environment, I decided to do a juice fast, as I had numerous times before, and a few days of silence and meditation. My physical self longed for it, as did my spirit.

My body had always been a great indicator of where my emotions had been. If a minor ailment presented itself, I could recognise where my thoughts or activities had been in the days or weeks leading up to it. As a result, over time I had come to enjoy a very clear and honest communication channel from my body, listening to what it was saying and doing my best to adhere to methods of improvement.

Often clients or friends would admit to knowing there was something wrong in their body, long before they did anything about it. Having seen the poor quality of life on offer once health is gone, I had learnt to try and act on any signs from my body as soon as possible. Health offers amazing freedom but once gone, it is often gone forever.

One of the meditations I did while in the cottage was guidance from a book I had recently bought. There had been many stages leading up to this point; much work had already been done. But this particular book looked at the intelligence of our cells, how they worked together, and offered guidance in asking them to eradicate the illness from the body. It was healing at a cellular level.

Mid-morning on the final day of the fasting, I sat myself down on my meditation cushion and slipped into a deep, peaceful place within. My mind was enjoying startling clarity, as is often the case for many people during or after fasting. Following through with the visualisations from the book, I asked my cells to free me from the last of the illness, if any of it still remained.

Next thing, I was running to the toilet, reaching it just in time for my projectile vomit to land in the bowl. It came from the deepest parts of my body and continued for ages. I heaved continually until I felt that there was absolutely nothing left inside me. Sitting on the floor totally drained, leaning against the bath, I waited in a daze in case there was more. There was. And then even more.

Eventually, it all ceased. I stood up, using the bath as support due to exhaustion. My stomach was aching from the repeated heaving. I walked back slowly to the meditation room, feeling very shifted. I lay down on the soft carpet, pulled a big blanket over me, curled up into a foetal position and slept for six hours straight.

The late afternoon light shone softly into the room. Subtle beginnings of an evening chill kissed my face, waking me gently. Lying there still snug under the blanket, looking at the beautiful light shining in, I felt like I was in a new life. Sending out a prayer

of gratitude for the guidance and courage that had brought me to this point of healing, I smiled in peace.

My body was still a little weak from the day's events. But as I became more mobile, getting up and on with the evening, euphoria washed over me. Preparing a gentle meal after the fast, my face ached with happiness. It was over.

My body had healed and no sign of the illness has resurfaced in the years since. While I am very respectful of everyone choosing their own method of healing, whether that is through surgical operations, natural therapies, eastern traditions or western pharmaceuticals, I had chosen the right method for me at that time. It had taken everything I had ever learnt to get myself through it, but I had done it.

It never felt appropriate to share this story with my clients though. The methods I used took almost four decades of preparation through my own, individual life experiences, and many months of healing. I had also known people who had died of melanoma and most other forms of cancer. It would not have been kind to offer false hope at such a time.

My appreciation for the gift of my life increased enormously. Choosing happiness became a daily thing, a new habit to integrate into my thinking. There were days when I couldn't be happy, but accepting this led to a more peaceful existence regardless. It allowed for acceptance of the harder days, knowing they brought gifts of their own and would pass, with happiness waiting again on the other side. Developing the habit of choosing happiness where possible, focusing more consciously on blessings, certainly saw my life heading in a better direction.

So when Rosemary asked me why I was always humming and happy, it was because I had just experienced a self-made miracle and was feeling very empowered and blessed.

Rosemary wanted to be happy, she told me later that day, but didn't know how. 'Well, just pretend to be, for half an hour. Maybe you'll enjoy it enough to actually *be* happy. Just the physical act of smiling can change your emotions, Rosemary. I dare you to not frown, complain or say anything negative for half an hour. Instead, say nice stuff, focus on the garden if you must, but remember to smile.' I also reminded Rosemary that I didn't know her in the past, which allowed her to be whoever she wanted to be right now.

'I don't think I ever felt I deserved to be happy, you know. My marriage break-up tarnished the family name and reputation. How do I *be* happy?' she asked, with a sincerity that broke my heart.

'You allow yourself to be. You are a beautiful person and you deserve to know happiness. Allow yourself. Choose to be.' Rosemary's hindrances were ones that I had known too well in the past myself. Reminding her that her family's opinion or reputation could only rob her of happiness if she allowed it to, I lightened the mood with some humour, assisting happiness to flow.

Although a little hesitant at first, Rosemary began to give herself permission to be happy, letting her guard down more each day, sharing a smile often, which eventually turned into occasional laughter. Whenever one of her old moods would strike, where she would rudely order me to do something, I would just laugh and say, 'I don't think so!' Instead of becoming even ruder, she would laugh then ask in a kinder manner, and I would happily oblige with no fuss.

Each day her health faded and was now at the point where she noticed it too. While continuing to speak about how she was going to show me what to do with her books, she no longer looked puzzled when I didn't join in with encouraging conversation about it. Rosemary's time out of bed was also decreasing. She had to accept being washed in bed. It was too much of a risk on her health and my back to try moving her into the shower any longer.

If I spent too much time in the rest of the house doing things, she would call me back in for company. As Rosemary was now in a hospital bed in her bedroom, her own bed was vacant beside her. The hospital bed was necessary, as she was no longer able to assist with any transfers out of bed. The hydraulics also allowed her to sit up without breaking my back, or the night carer's back.

When there were no other duties to do, other than to keep her company, I took to lying on her old bed while we talked. Rosemary was most comfortable resting on her side in the hospital bed, facing me. Before long we both fell into the habit of having an afternoon nap. Her street was peaceful at that time of day and I was right there if she needed anything. I slept well, getting myself all snuggly under the blankets. We would wake and share any dreams we'd had and continue lying there, facing each other from beds side by side, talking until I had to get up and attend to things. They were special, tender times for us both.

One afternoon, while we were lying down talking, Rosemary asked me what death is like, the actual dying part. Other clients had asked this too. We have all learnt from other people's experiences, as when pregnant women ask other women what childbirth is like, or people who plan to travel ask other travellers what a particular country is like.

In this case though, a dying person cannot ask someone who has died what it is like, as they are not around to say. So they often asked me for my opinion and what I had experienced. With honesty, I always told them about Stella going out smiling. I also shared how all of the transitions I had witnessed were over in a short time. Stella's story always brought them peace, just as it had for me being there.

In modern society, little emphasis is put on spiritual and emotional wellbeing in the treatment of dying people, or in the treatment of anyone who is ill. Unless dying people are blessed to be in a centre that embraces those aspects of life, they are usually left to wonder about such things. This is very frightening, as well as isolating. There is an enormous gap between treating physical health and even *acknowledging* there is a *link* with spiritual and emotional health in modern society. By uniting these needs and treating all aspects of someone's journey, the dying person is able to reconcile a great deal more within themself prior to their last weeks or days.

This area is one of the obvious failings we have by hiding death from society's eyes. Dying people have so many questions, things that could have been asked much earlier in their life had they considered that they would one day die, as we all will. If asked earlier, these questions about deeper matters would allow people to find their answers and their own peace sooner. They would then not have to live in denial about their approaching death out of pure fear and terror, as is often the case.

There came a time though, when Rosemary could no longer deny her approaching death. There were times when she wanted to be alone. 'Much to contemplate,' she would say.

As I came back into her room early one evening she declared, 'I wish I'd let myself be happier. What a miserable person I have been. I just didn't think I deserved to be happy. But I do. I know that now. Laughing with you this morning, I realised that there was no need at all to feel guilty for being happy.' Sitting down on the side of her bed, I listened as she went on. 'It really is our own choice, isn't it? We can stop ourselves from being happy because we think we don't deserve it, or because we allow the opinions of others to become a part of who we are. But it is not who we are, is it? We can be whoever we allow ourselves to be. My God, why didn't I work this out sooner? What a waste!'

Lovingly, I smiled at her. 'Well, I've been in that place too, Rosemary. But being gentle and compassionate is a healthier way to treat yourself. At any rate, you've worked it out now, by allowing some happiness in recently. We've had some beautiful times.' Recalling things we had laughed at, Rosemary then chuckled, and found herself in a happy mood again.

'I am starting to like who I am these days, Bronnie, this lighter side of me.' I said I liked this side of her too. 'Oh, wasn't I a tyrant?' she laughed, thinking back to our first weeks together.

It wasn't all laughter though. There were moments of incredible sadness and tenderness too, when we held hands and cried together, knowing her life was almost over.

On her last afternoon, pneumonia had taken over and her throat was very thick with mucus. A few relatives had arrived, as well as a couple of lovely friends. While her departure was not the smoothest I'd seen, it was incredibly brief. The dear woman had moved on elsewhere.

The community nurse was due that afternoon, and arrived about ten minutes later. While Rosemary's relatives and friends were out chatting in the kitchen, the nurse and I cleaned her, then dressed her in a fresh nightgown. The nurse was one who hadn't met Rosemary. As we were attending to her body, she asked me what she had been like as a person.

Looking at the body of my lovely friend and at the peaceful face that now lay sleeping forever, I smiled. Memories of our afternoons lying in adjacent beds came flooding back. Images of Rosemary laughing, giving me cheek, also flashed by. 'She was happy,' I replied truthfully. 'Yes. She was a happy woman.'

Happiness is now

Of all my clients, Cath was by far the greatest philosopher. She had an opinion on everything. They weren't blind beliefs either, rather very informed. As a lover of knowledge and philosophy, she had absorbed a huge amount of learning in her 51 years. Cath still lived in the house where she was born. 'My mother was born and died here. I am going to do the same,' she stated with determination.

She was a lover of baths, so the best conversations we had in our months together were usually with her in the bath and me sitting on a stool beside it. With my own love and appreciation of a good soak, I was determined to help Cath use her tub for as long as possible.

Growing weaker over time, the risk of her falling became too great. She was losing the strength to get in or out, even with my assistance. Sitting in the bath one afternoon, with me on the stool beside her, the realisation sunk in that it would be her last ever soak. Cath started to cry, her tears falling into the water surrounding her. 'It's all going. It's the bath now,' she cried. 'Then I won't even be able to stand, then me, myself, gone. It's all going. My life is winding down.' Her crying soon became sobbing, raw and uninhibited. Although my heart went out to her, and my own

tears were close, it was also good to see someone able to release their emotions with such honesty.

From the depths of her soul, Cath cried a river of tears. When it seemed there was nothing left, she sat in the bath quietly, exhausted from her sobbing, staring at the water and drawing patterns on the surface with her finger. Then it would start again, each sob coming from a place even deeper and more primal than before. She cried for every sad memory ever held within her, for all of the people she had lost, for all of those she would lose by going. But especially, Cath cried for herself.

Whenever I would attempt to leave, to give her some privacy, she would shake her head and ask me to stay. So I sat on the stool, sending her love, saying nothing, just being there while she sobbed. It was heartbreaking but healthy at the same time, knowing she was letting go from her very core.

When another half-hour had passed and the water was losing its heat, I offered to top it up with some more. Cath shook her head, 'No, it's okay. It's time.' And with that, she pulled the plug and looked to me for assistance in getting out. When I took her in her wheelchair out into the sun soon after, wrapped in her pale blue dressing-gown and fiery red slippers, she seemed peaceful.

'Listen to the bird,' she smiled. We both sat quietly, delighting in its song, smiling even more when we heard its mate reply from a tree further up the street. 'Every day is a gift now. Every day was always a gift, but it's only now I have slowed down enough to truly see the huge amount of beauty each day offers. We take so much for granted. Listen.' Different songs rang out from a few nearby trees.

Cath said how she had come to see what a powerful force gratitude is. It is too easy to always want more from life, she said, and that's fine to a degree, since expanding who we are is a part of dreaming and growing. But as we will never have everything we want and will always be growing, appreciating what we already have along the way is the most important thing. Life goes so fast, she stated, whether you live into your twenties, forties or eighties.

She was right. Every day in itself is a gift and a blessing. It is all we ever have anyway, the moment we are in. For the past twenty years I had kept a gratitude journal, where I wrote down a few things I was grateful for at the end of the day. Often there were lots of things to be grateful for. Occasionally, through the darkest times, I struggled to come up with any. I felt so emotionally exhausted at those times that even finding blessings was an effort, yet I always persisted. Even then I would manage to find things to be grateful for, like clean water, somewhere to sleep, food in my belly, a smile from a stranger, or a bird singing.

As I explained to Cath, I'd had to create two habits, until they merged into one. While I was appreciating things at the end of the day when writing them down, it had taken commitment to develop the habit of appreciating things as they were happening as well, particularly intricate things. So I created a new habit of saying a silent prayer of thanks at the very moment each of the gifts was given.

Being grateful for nature had always been effortless in the moment. An example I gave was if a soft breeze kissed my face, I was grateful for being healthy enough to be outside and able to feel it. Still, I wanted to be more grateful for other things along the way too. Although writing in the journal had certainly opened

me up to a stronger level of gratitude, it was the success of living more presently that had finally brought gratitude into my everyday living situations. There is something to say thank you for every hour, I decided, and that was how my habit was formed.

'Then do you receive many blessings, if you are grateful along the way?' Cath enquired.

'When I allow it Cath, when I remember my own worth and let it flow, yes. I've definitely had some great blessings in my life. Sometimes I just have to get out of my own way first. Like everyone, blessings come to me more when I am in a place of gratitude and flow.'

Cath laughed at my theory and agreed. 'Yes. It wants to flow to us, but without gratitude and allowing it through, we block it. Most people just don't realise how good they have it. I didn't for a long time either. Thankfully, I had started working it out before this illness struck, so I was able to live from a better place then.'

After some lovely time in the sun, Cath needed her lunch and rest. Served in bed, lunch was ice cream and stewed fruit. That was all she could handle eating. Everything else took too much effort to chew, she told me, and tasted lifeless. Afterwards, I moved her into a more comfortable position and drew the curtains closed. Her painkillers had recently been increased, which left her more comfortable but exhausted. In no time, she was in a deep sleep.

In the early evening, Cath's ex-girlfriend dropped by to say hello. There were no hard feelings between them. They had remained good friends after their break-up, more than a decade ago. It was a kind and respectful friendship. Other visitors were regular too: Cath's older brother with his wife and children, and her younger brother. Some neighbours dropped in daily,

and friends and work colleagues also came by every chance they could. She was a well-loved woman.

From the various stories shared by her visitors, Cath had been very driven in her work but usually with a positive energy for everyone. Now, as with most dying people, she loved her visitors to bring her up to date on their lives and on what was happening in the world outside her fence. When dying people can no longer live in that world themselves, they usually savour every morsel of news from outside. Often friends and relatives don't know what to say. Hearing about life outside keeps a person in the swing of things and this is positive for them, not negative.

Such was definitely the case for Cath. She wanted to hear about happy things as much as possible. It was hard for the visitors though, as they were often heartbroken at the impending loss of someone they loved. Because of our easy connection, I was able to speak openly with Cath about anything. So at the request of her friend, Sue, I touched on the emotions of her visitors one day.

Sue was battling every day to stay positive for her friend, when all she wanted to do was sob her eyes out every time she visited. Sue told me how she would sit in her car outside each time, psyching herself into being strong and happy before coming in. Then she would sit out there again afterwards, crying her heart out. 'I sort of see that,' Cath admitted later. 'I just don't know if I can deal with Sue's sadness on top of my own. I can't carry that too.'

'You don't have to carry it,' I said. 'Just allow her to express herself honestly by not changing the subject when she shares how she is feeling. She needs to say stuff and all you need to do is allow her to. You don't have to carry it as well. She's not asking you to.

She just needs to tell you how much she loves you and she can't do it without crying or without you letting her.'

Cath understood and said she felt slack for creating so much sadness for everyone. It almost embarrassed her. 'Gosh Cath, does pride really matter at this time in your life?' I asked directly, but kindly. She laughed in reply. 'Just bring it out into the open and allow others to tell you how much they love you,' I said.

Cath smiled, sitting silently for a moment before responding. 'Some time ago, when I realised the seriousness of my disease, I learnt to accept my feelings and not reject them. When they come up, I allow them to now. That's how I was so free sobbing in front of you that day in the bath. I've learnt to accept my feelings for what they are in the moment, without rejecting them by trying to block them out. They are really just a by-product of my thoughts and mind anyway. I know it is possible to create new feelings by focusing on better things. But those within me are already a part of the current me, and are best released, not carried forward. Yet here I am, not respecting the feelings of others by rejecting and blocking *their* honest expression.' Cath shook her head and sighed. After a moment's thought, she looked at me smiling and said, 'I guess it is time for me to be brave and let their tears flow too.'

Nodding in agreement, I suggested that things would still probably be light after that release and on following occasions. But the current build-up of emotions from her friends and relatives needed to be shared. They loved her and they needed to be able to say and show this, even if that sometimes resulted in tears.

Many tearful conversations between Cath and her visitors followed, but the love that flowed was inspiring. Hearts were

opened and though they were breaking, in some way this was healing too, through the expression of love flowing.

On one particularly tearful day, Cath's last visitor had just left. She was laughing through tears of both sadness and joy, as she and Cath cracked jokes with each other until she was out of sight. When she was gone, Cath looked at me with love. 'Yes, it is important to let feelings come out, to accept them, and it is healthy for my friends too,' she said. 'There will also be better memories for them. They won't be blocked by carrying things they don't need to.'

Enjoying her analysis, I nodded in understanding. In my darker days, I'd finally been able to separate myself from my feelings, realising they were just an emotional expression of my pain or joy, and were not who I truly was. Like everyone, I carried the wisdom of my soul within me. To know my true self though, that divine wisdom residing within, I *had* to allow my feelings out. If not, they would always block me from reaching the potential of who I was truly here to be. So I loved to hear of Cath coming to similar conclusions, expressed in her own words.

Already of thin build, it took very little time for Cath to start looking ill as her weight continued to fall off. 'My time is winding up. I can't ignore the signs, that's for sure,' she declared one morning, while sitting on the commode. So many conversations with clients happened as they sat doing their morning business on the portable toilet, while I sat nearby. The fact that they were having a bowel movement never really came into it. It was just a part of the routine and there was no point letting such business get in the way of a good yarn. Helping Cath back to bed afterwards,

I agreed that indeed the signs were pointing to her time winding up.

Once settled back into bed, she said, 'I am not sorry for how I have lived, because I have learnt through most of what I have done. But if I was to do anything differently, given the chance again, I would have allowed more happiness in.' I was a little puzzled to hear these words from her. By now I had heard them from other clients, but Cath appeared to be a happy person. Well, as happy as one can be when you are dying and feeling absolutely awful in your body through the process.

I questioned her on this. While explaining that she had loved her work, she admitted to putting too much emphasis on the results. Cath had worked on projects for troubled youths and believed that making a contribution was vital for a satisfying life. 'We all have talents to share, every single one of us. It doesn't matter what your job is. What matters is that you are trying to make a conscious contribution, hoping to create a better world,' Cath elaborated. 'The only way things are going to improve is for us all to realise the inter-connectedness we share. Nothing good can be done alone. If only we learnt to work together for the good of all, instead of against each other in competition and fear, the world would be a vastly improved place.'

Despite being exhausted and spending her time mostly confined to bed, Cath still had a lot to say. The philosopher would be the last part of her to go, I suspected, which suited me just fine. I rubbed cream into her arms and hands as she went on. 'We all have a positive contribution to make. I've made mine, but while I was searching for my purpose in life, I forgot to enjoy myself along the way. It was all about the result of finding what I was looking

for. Then when I did find work I loved, work I could do with the heartfelt intention of contributing, I was still results-based.'

This was something I had seen often. They were also familiar words from other clients. While working towards goals, the present moment is too often neglected along the way. This is what Cath was talking about. Her happiness was based on the end result, and was not enjoyed during the process of getting there. I commented that none of us were immune from doing that at times.

She continued. 'Yes, but this way I have robbed myself of potential happiness. That's what I mean when I say I would do it differently. It is important, sure, to work towards finding your purpose and contributing to the world, in any capacity. But depending on the end result for your happiness is not the way to do it. Gratitude for every day along the way is the key to acknowledging and enjoying happiness now. Not when the results come in, or when you retire, or when this or that happens.' Cath sighed, exhausted from her fervent outburst but with a need to be heard, as was so often the case.

After listening and sharing my understanding of her thoughts, I adjusted her blankets and headed out to the kitchen to make us some tea. Cutting some fresh lemongrass from the garden, I thought about Cath's words. Very similar words from other dying people also came to mind. As a bird sang and the scent of lemongrass, now in the teapot, wafted through the kitchen, it was very easy to feel completely present and grateful.

Wanting to relax and listen now, Cath asked about where I lived. Laughing a little, I explained how this was the first question any of my friends asked me whenever they called. 'Where are you these days?' were words my ears knew well.

I told Cath all about my earlier years of drifting, followed by the recent years of house-sitting, and how recently, my energy for such a transient existence was beginning to wane. House-sits were not as forthcoming or consistent for me in Melbourne, as they had been in Sydney. Not knowing where I'd be living next was leaving me weary, as was the whole moving process. Despite once loving and thriving on that lifestyle, my enthusiasm for it was undeniably turning to exhaustion.

After staying with a few friends between house-sits, I had recently rented the spare room of a house belonging to a woman I knew a little. Although I was hugely grateful for her kindness and to not be moving every few weeks, it was still very much her domain. It never truly felt like home and was not ideal for the long term.

It was all meant to be though, as the situation served to intensify my longing for an abode of my own again. It had been almost a decade since I'd enjoyed my own kitchen and home space. The desire increased daily. Cath said that she couldn't even imagine such a life, having lived in the same house for 51 years. I said I couldn't imagine her life either, and that even though I was starting to long for my own space again, a part of me would always love to roam a little. Now though, I was thinking in terms of having a settled base and travelling from there, rather than moving my whole home base every time itchy feet kicked in.

The years of roaming, which had been a part of me for my whole adult life, were a large part of who I used to be. Now there were significant changes happening within. No longer could I even imagine the thrill or muster the energy to maintain my old

lifestyle. All I wanted was my own kitchen again and the privacy of my own space.

Agreeing that change is a guaranteed part of life, Cath laughed and said I helped the law of averages out by changing my life so often. Replying that people like me were needed to balance out people like her who lived in the same house for half a century, we both giggled. Our lives were so different, yet we shared a very strong connection. It was our shared love of philosophy.

Wanting to know how I ended up in this field of palliative care, Cath was astonished when I spoke of all my years in the banking industry. 'Oh, I cannot imagine it at all,' she said surprised.

'Me either, thank goodness,' I laughed. Thinking back to that time, I was amazed by how much could be fitted into one lifetime. It was difficult to even imagine myself being in that world, let alone for so long. 'Stockings, high heels and corporate uniforms just never sat right for me, Cath; nor did the structured life.'

'I'm not surprised, considering the life you have chosen since,' she chuckled. Then she turned more serious and asked how long I was going to do this work for, or whether I had any other work aspirations. Many things had been on my mind recently. Talking them through with Cath gave them some clarity.

Somewhere along the way in the last twelve months or so, the idea of teaching songwriting in a jail had come to mind. The prison system was something I knew nothing about, yet the idea had stuck with me. Over time the seed had continued to grow slowly. I had recently made some contact with a great woman who had taken me under her wing, guiding me through the possibilities of finding funding.

'Yes, get back to the living, Bronnie. It is beautiful work you do here and obviously a part of your purpose this time around, but it must wear you down sometimes,' Cath insisted. Telling her that it had been almost eight years since I first began working in this field, I felt something inside me shift. It was the acknowledgement that I was actually close to hitting the wall, if I continued. I was starting to burn out.

Seeing people find their peace and witnessing their growth, in the sunset of their life, was an incredible honour. It brought me many rewards of satisfaction and fulfilment. There was no denying I had loved this work and still did. But I also wanted to work where there was a little hope, around people who had a chance to grow and change their lives considerably, before they were ready to die. The desire to work entirely in a creative field had also been building, as had the hope of being able to work more from home, once I did find my own space to live in again.

Hearing my thoughts translated into conversation with Cath gave a tangible energy to the process. Before I knew it, ideas about teaching in a jail were occupying my mind increasingly. My time in care work was coming to an end. It needed to. I'd given all I could to it.

Not long before passing on, Cath got a second wind and appeared to be getting better for a couple of days. I'd seen this before and telephoned all of her regular visitors to come and spend some brief time with her, as she was about to turn onto the final, downward slope. Some of them questioned me after their visit, as she looked so great and had improved energy. It seems to be a blessing we are occasionally given, after someone has been ill for a long time. It helps us to remember them with a bit of their

old spark, before the illness had taken over. Laughter rang out from Cath's room for two days, while she cracked witty jokes and enjoyed beautiful clarity with friends and family.

When I arrived the following day though, I was looking at a dying woman, hardly able to even respond verbally. Cath was limp with no strength at all, and remained that way for another three days. She mostly slept, but when awake she smiled at me as I changed her pads and washed her. Even the luxury of urinating on a commode was now in the past.

Friends came and went solemnly, knowing they had just said their final goodbye to their dear Cath. At the end of the third day, it was obvious she would not make it through the night. So when my shift was finished, I stayed on there with Cath's brother and sister-in-law. The night carer had never seen a dead body and was hugely relieved I was staying. Thinking back to when I had been in that position all of those years ago, I saw how far I had come. Little did I know just how many beautiful people I would meet, in such a personal way, nor the unforeseeable blessings of learning that would be bestowed on me.

Cath's painkillers had been given to her intravenously for the last few days, as she could no longer swallow solid tablets. The palliative care nurse arrived in the evening to dispense some more. Cath was no longer awake or coherent. 'This will be the last,' she told Cath's brother and me. 'She won't make it through the night.' We thanked her gently and I walked her out. 'She'll be gone within the hour,' the nurse told me, as I said goodbye at the gate. There was so much joy and sadness in this role. Sadness in saying goodbye and letting go; happiness for the end of their

suffering and for the love we shared. It was bittersweet and some tears slowly fell.

Cath didn't wait another hour. She passed away as I was walking back to her room. Her breathing had simply slowed down and then stopped. I looked at her lying there, that gorgeous spirit now elsewhere. Smiling through my tears, I could still hear her voice in my head. 'Don't hang around with dying people forever, Bronnie. Let some joy back in,' she had said to me in a dying whisper the previous morning.

My tears burst forth as I stood beside the bed. 'Happy travels, my friend,' I wished her silently.

Her brother and sister-in-law came around to the side of the bed, each giving me a loving hug through their own tears. Formalities then needed to be attended to, which her family wanted to take care of. I looked back at Cath's body one last time, a body I had washed and massaged so many times, but Cath wasn't there anymore. Her spirit had moved on, so I said my final goodbye to her and her family. The night carer also said goodnight, before she headed off down the road. Walking out of Cath's home for the last time, the streetlights shining bright in the quiet suburban street, I pulled the gate closed behind me.

The world always felt surreal after I had experienced a passing. My senses were heightened and I felt like I was observing the world from somewhere else. As I climbed the steps of the tram, I was hardly aware of others around me. The world went by outside, as I sat thinking about Cath and the beautiful time we had shared.

When the tram stopped at a red light, I watched laughing people walk into a restaurant. It was a balmy evening and everyone I saw coming and going was jovial. My tired, weary eyes smiled,

viewing signs of such happiness. Sounds from inside the tram then came to my ears; I'd been zoned out for some time. All I could hear were happy conversations. It was just one of those nights, when happiness was in the air. Although there had certainly been sadness in my night, there was also happiness for having known Cath.

The sounds of laughter from others danced with me, blessing me with happiness of my own. As the tram moved on again, I looked out the window and thought about the good hearts of people everywhere.

Gratitude warmed my heart and I couldn't help but smile. I wasn't thinking of the past or the future. Happiness is *now* and that is where I was.

A matter of perspective

One of my final clients, and one who had a loving and lasting impression on me, was a dear man in a nursing home. I was still reluctant to take any of those shifts. They always brought me down the moment I walked through the door. It was heartbreaking to witness the situation that the residents were in. I only accepted nursing home shifts when there was absolutely no work on the horizon with private home clients. In this case, I was very glad I did.

Lenny was already close to passing when we met. His daughter had employed me as an extra, knowing that regular staff members at the nursing home were too busy to give him the care she wanted for him. He slept much of the day, accepting cups of tea but declining all food. When he woke, he would pat the side of the bed for me to sit close to him. He didn't have the energy to speak loudly. 'It has been a good life,' he would say regularly. 'Yes, a good life.'

This was certainly a matter of perspective and reinforced how happiness is based on choice, far more than circumstance. Lenny's life had not been at all easy. Both of his parents had died before he was fourteen, then his siblings had either died or dispersed over the following years, until he had lost contact with them all.

He met Rita, the love of his life, when he was 22 and married her in a whirlwind, as he put it.

Four children came from the marriage. Their oldest son had died in the Vietnam War, something he still shook his head about. Lenny spoke fiercely of war and the insanity of it. He said he would never understand how anyone could possibly think that war would ever bring lasting peace. His thoughts about the madness and sadness of the current world situation were shared with wisdom. I soon valued this lovely man's intelligence and philosophies.

Staff members would drop by now and then offering food, which he always declined with a smile and a gentle shake of his head as it rested against the pillow. The busy activity in the halls seemed to fade away after a while, as if we were in our own dimension, totally unaffected by the noise nearby.

Their eldest daughter had married a Canadian man and moved there. She died six months later, after losing control of her car in a snowstorm. 'A shining star,' he said of her. 'She was always a shining star and now she is one forever.'

Working in this field, I had long ago given up the effort of trying to hold back my tears. So much effort is put into keeping up appearances in our society, but it all comes at too high a price. The honesty of my own emotions also helped the families at times. It gave them permission to let their own tears flow. Some people had not allowed themselves to cry for their whole adult life.

An occasional tear fell down my cheek as Lenny shared his stories with me. There was just something about his honest heart and the way he told his stories. Lenny's youngest son had been too sensitive for the world and spiralled into mental illness. In those days, support systems were not in place for this. If the family

could not cope completely, patients were admitted to mental asylums. Lenny and Rita wanted to keep Alistair at home in a loving environment, but doctors would not allow it. Alistair spent the rest of his years in a drugged haze and Lenny never saw him smile again.

Their remaining daughter now lived in Dubai, where her husband had a construction contract. She phoned the nursing home while I was working and spoke with me. She was easy to speak to, but unable to get home to see her father.

His love, Rita, had died in her late forties, only a few years after they had lost Alistair to the mental health system. From Rita's diagnosis to her departure, it was only a matter of weeks. Yet here was this lovely man telling me he had lived a good life. Through tears, I asked how he saw it that way. 'I have known love, and that love has not lessened for one day in all of these years,' he said.

I found myself not wanting to go home at the end of the shift, but Lenny needed his rest anyway. As I returned each day, I prayed he would still be there. It was a difficult thing in a way. I knew he wanted to go, to be with Rita and the children he had lost. In that respect, I wished him a speedy departure. But for my own growth and connection, I wanted him to hold on as long as possible.

He had worked hard, too hard he said, but it had numbed his pain initially. He didn't know any other way to deal with his losses. In later years, on the recommendation of Rose, his daughter in Dubai, he had sought counselling and had learnt to speak about it all. Talking of his losses had healed him well. He was now able to speak about his life freely. I told him I was grateful he could.

He asked me about my life and found it fascinating that a young woman would sell all of her belongings, pack up her car and head off into a new life, with no idea at all where she would end up. And that she had done this quite often.

I explained how deeply my first serious relationship had affected my life. The suppression, control and emotional abuse experienced in that relationship seemed to create a tantalising invitation from a different life, one I was yet to discover but somehow believed existed. When the relationship was finally over, I felt a sense of freedom I had never known. I had met him when I very young, so had never truly known the freedom of adult life. By the end of the relationship, I was 23, divorced, and starting to do what all 23-year-olds should be doing—having fun.

Driving six hours to a friend's wedding a few months later, I discovered a part of me that was like coming home. Simply, that a part of me belonged on the road and always would. It was the most natural thing in the world to be driving long distances. Since then, my freedom had become one of my strongest values. Most of my decisions were based on how they would affect that freedom and I shaped my life accordingly. Of course, freedom can be enjoyed in a regular life too. It is a state of mind more than anything. The freedom to be *you* is the greatest freedom of all, regardless of the town or suburb you live in.

Lenny said that many partners think they own each other. While there was definitely a need for compromise and commitment in any relationship, especially so if children are involved, it is up to each individual to maintain a sense of his or her own self. He questioned me more about my life with genuine curiosity, and listened with interest when I told him I was thinking about moving

on from this work. 'Yes,' he said. 'There is a good life waiting for you, Bronnie, without having to spend all of your time around death. Get back among the living.' I smiled at his blessing.

The nursing home was run by a Christian denomination. Lenny had stopped going to church after Rita died. Not because he didn't believe anymore, but because it was too painful to be there without hearing his beautiful wife singing in the pew beside him. Lenny said he didn't care whether it was a Christian nursing home, one run by any other religion, or by no religion at all. He would have made the best of any situation. Either way, he was going home to Rita soon and that's all he cared about. But Christian it was, and there were many volunteers there as well as staff.

One of the volunteers was a man named Roy who would do the rounds, reading to the residents from the Bible each day. He had offered his services to Lenny months earlier, but Lenny had politely declined. Roy had persisted and offered them on numerous occasions since; each time Lenny politely declined again.

Now that Lenny was in his last days, with no strength to resist, Roy took it on himself to come in every afternoon and read passages from the Bible to him. He read for a long time. Even a well person, one who was totally devoted to Bible study, would have grown a little weary by the end of his daily monotonous delivery. Out of politeness, I also did my best to stay attentive as Roy read on, but sometimes I also nodded off, without meaning to. He read for a *very* long time.

Even worse was that Roy would then want to discuss the passage he had read with Lenny. As Lenny's carer, my priority was the wellbeing of my client. So I gently explained that Lenny

was only able to speak when he had the energy to and should not be forced, which was true.

'I know you're a lovely lady, Bronnie,' Lenny said to me quietly one day, after Roy had moved onto another room. 'And I know you like to think well of people. But if that bloke comes back in here again, I am going to boot his butt from here to Timbuktu.' We both laughed aloud, knowing full well that Roy would be back at the same time tomorrow.

'If I am not going to Heaven by now, then what's the point of all this religious stuff anyway?' he chuckled. 'And I can't concentrate on what he is saying. I don't have the energy.'

'His intention is kind, Lenny. That is the main thing, surely,' I replied. We both laughed gently. Roy was a sweet man and although it was obvious he meant kindly, it *was* becoming a bit of a comedy sketch. Each afternoon when he arrived, we both knew what we were in for. He was really not doing the wise words of the Bible any justice through his monotonous, lifeless delivery. 'You can sleep through it, at least,' I laughed. Lenny nodded, smiling.

The days were wearing on and other work had been offered to me, but I declined. I wanted to see this beautiful man out, if it worked out that way. I was feeling a loyalty to his daughter, Rose, too. It would be awful for her to think of her dad dying in another country with a new person to deal with every day. I also knew I would miss our quiet talks soon enough, and didn't want to give them up any sooner than I had to. As it turned out, that time came around very quickly anyway.

It was a hectic Thursday afternoon in the bustling suburb. Everything was busy: the roads, the shops, and then the nursing home when I arrived. Staff members with food trolleys were

buzzing about the corridors. Doctors were doing their rounds. Nurses rushed about with more work than they could handle. Patients were wheeled about in their big chairs, some of them drooling from the sides of their mouths, staring vacantly into space. Nursing homes were such tragically sad scenes. This day was no different.

As I walked past the desk, office girls were moaning to each other about another office girl. I wondered how they could be so surrounded by death, yet still put their energy into complaining about trivial things. Unfortunately, most people give their energy to trivial things of no relevance in the long run.

From the moment I walked into Lenny's room, it was like being in a different world again. I could feel the peace in the semi-darkened room immediately. Dragging a chair closer to Lenny as he lay sleeping, I tried to read a book for a while. But my mind was on him. He stirred after some time and saw me there. Patting his hand on the bed for my hand, I gave it to him. Smiling, he drifted back to sleep and the hours went by. Every now and then he would stir and I would give him a sip of drink or just kiss his hand.

'It's been a good life,' he said quietly as he stirred. 'It's been a good life.' He drifted off again, as I watched lovingly. My heart was aching. A few tears started falling. I wondered why I couldn't have settled for an easier job with no emotional attachment. It was just too painful at times. Yet I knew that other jobs didn't come with the gifts I also received from knowing my clients.

'Mmm. A good life,' he repeated, opening his weary eyes again and smiling at me. Seeing my tears, he squeezed my hand. 'Don't

you worry, my girl. I'm ready.' His voice was almost a whisper. 'Promise me something.'

I wanted to sob but I just smiled through my tears. It was one of those smiles that aren't really smiles, just a sign of someone trying to be brave but not succeeding at all. 'Of course, Len.'

'Don't worry about the little stuff. None of it matters. Only love matters. If you remember this, that love is always present, it will be a good life.' His breathing was changing, making it harder for him to talk.

'Thanks for everything, Len,' I managed through my tears. 'I'm so glad we met.' They seemed like such childish words in a way, as there was so much more I could have said and wanted to. But in the end, they conveyed my feelings in the simplest way. Leaning over and kissing his forehead, I saw that he was drifting off again.

I sat there allowing my tears to flow freely. Sometimes it takes just loosening the tap on tears to find a whole bucket of them waiting to pour out. You don't even know what they are all for. I had loosened the tap and cried a flood.

When my tears were drained, I sat quietly, looking at him with tenderness. Lenny continued to sleep through the next few hours. It was possible he would never wake again. Then, of course, in walked Roy.

I wanted to laugh, knowing Lenny would have seen the humour in the situation, if he had been awake. But he wasn't and my gentle smile to Roy, through eyes that were bloodshot and tired from buckets of tears, told him the full picture. Lenny may not ever wake again.

A few slow tears of love fell once more, but it was no longer a torrent of sorrow and they eased off again. I think it was seeing Roy's

sweet face and knowing his kind intentions that set me off, even if a part of me knew that Lenny didn't particularly want him there.

Roy sat on the other side of the bed. He opened his Bible to start reading, but looked to me for approval. I just pulled a face that said, 'Well, it's up to you, but I think he'd like the peace.' He nodded. The Bible stayed open in his hands but he didn't read. I felt gratitude towards him for respecting the reverence of the moment. It's not that reading the Bible would not have been a reverent intention. But it wasn't necessary in the sacredness that already existed.

Lenny reached for my hand with his eyes still closed. I stood up and gave it to him. His breathing was rattling and irregular. I could smell what had now become too familiar to me, but which is impossible to describe. It was the smell of death.

Then opening his eyes, Lenny looked straight at me and smiled. But it wasn't my mate, Lenny, who I had come to know. It was Lenny and the full glory of his soul. There was no illness or exhaustion in his smile. It was one of a soul completely free of ego and personality. It was *pure* love, completely free of *everything* else. Only radiance and joy remained and their shine was almost blinding in their beauty.

I smiled back with honesty as my heart completely burst open. We smiled euphorically, knowing it *is* all just love in the end. I'd never known such absolutely, uninhibited smiling, given or received. There was *nothing* in the way. As we both smiled into each other, beaming, time was frozen.

After a while, Lenny closed his eyes and a peaceful smile remained on his lips. My own smile remained. My heart was simply too open to *stop* beaming.

A couple of minutes later, Lenny's spirit departed his body. He was gone.

Watching from the other side of the bed, Roy's life had been transformed. Closing his Bible, he said quietly that he now understood what God's love looked like and felt he had experienced a miracle seeing Lenny's peace before passing. I agreed that God works in mysterious ways.

Roy and I sat in the silence for a while longer. The moment would be gone as soon as I notified the staff, which I needed to do before long. When we said goodbye, Roy held my hand for a long time, trying to find the right words, unsure of what to say or how to articulate what had happened. He seemed hesitant to let me go, as if it would pop his balloon if he didn't have me there to share the story.

'We've been blessed, Roy. That's all we need to know,' I said to him gently. He grabbed me and hugged me tightly, like a frightened child, not wanting to be alone with the grandeur of it. 'You're going to be alright, Roy.'

'How do I explain this to anyone?' he pleaded with me.

'Perhaps you don't,' I smiled. 'Or perhaps you do. Either way, the same force that just gave us that miracle will be there for you again, to help you say the right words if you need to share them.'

Shaking his head but with a smile of joy he said, 'My life will never be the same.' I smiled lovingly and we hugged again. When all of the paperwork was done, I left the nursing home. There was too much activity now around Lenny's body. We'd had our time.

Peak-hour traffic had dispersed from the tree-lined avenue where I walked. The late afternoon light shone spectacularly

through the branches. My heart was elated and wide open. I was in love with everything and everyone.

The job had certainly had its ups and downs. But no amount of planning or qualifications could have ever given me the gifts my role had bestowed on me, time after time.

Still euphoric from the gift of love I had received, soft tears of joy and gratitude fell, as I walked along with a huge smile.

Yes. It is a good life, Lenny, a good life indeed.

Changing times

Caring for so many dying people had left me both elated and exhausted. Countless positive changes had unfolded in my life as a result, but I was definitely ready for change. It was time to pursue the idea of teaching songwriting in the women's prison system.

There was much red tape and a lot to learn about the private philanthropic sector: which foundations had funding guidelines available that my project would fit into, and how to make the applications. Some of my guidance came from a group of women who had been doing theatre workshops in jails for several years. As it turned out, I had been living right next door to them during my first Melbourne chapter almost a decade earlier. My first song hadn't even been written then, so I was hardly in a position to set up a songwriting program. Yet it was strangely delightful to walk down that street again, past my old home, all the while gauging the changes in my life and self since.

My initial efforts brought no success in any jails in Victoria, so I decided to try for New South Wales. Also, I was in a long-distance relationship with a man in that state to the north. I didn't think the relationship was going to work, but it had a better chance if we were closer, rather than being separated by a thousand kilometres.

A delightful cousin, who lived near to both the man and the chosen jail, offered to put me up while I found somewhere to live.

Liz, who had taken me under her wing months earlier, was an incredible help through the whole establishment process for the jail program. Her insistence that anything can be done by using networks of people and linking the right ones up, kept me encouraged. I was also reminded of words of wisdom from many clients: that nothing good can be done alone. We need to work together. Liz also educated me on the need to find an auspice for the funding. Most philanthropic foundations required a charity to receive the funds on my behalf, enabling the foundation to enjoy the tax concessions that come with donating to charity groups. I could then invoice the charity for the full amount and draw on that as my wage, as a self-employed person. Finding an organisation willing to channel these funds was somewhat challenging but, as life would have it, I was reminded again of the cycles of life and how often we do a full circle.

Prior to moving to the country town I grew up in, my family had lived on the outskirts of Sydney. In those days, the seventies, it was a rural area. My first year of schooling was undertaken there. Now, after countless phone calls and emails, the auspice door finally opened, via the church connected with my very first school. After 35 years, there I was sitting in an office, overlooking the playground I knew as a little girl in kindergarten. It added beautiful sentimentality for me.

Excitement from the Senior Education Officer at the women's jail kept me hanging in there, when funding applications became challenging. She was a progressive, enthusiastic woman and marketed my proposal to her regional management with complete

belief in my vision. I had contacted two women's jails initially, but the difference in response and support offered were enormous. One said they would not even supply pens and notebooks; I would have to do that myself. The other offered not only those, but also guitars and anything else they could assist with. As I became more involved in the process, it became obvious that dealing with one jail and one class would be more than enough anyway.

For ages it seemed like nothing was happening. When it finally fell into place, though, it moved like lightning. I was on the road north, leaving Melbourne within a couple of days. For a month or so I lived with my cousin and her huge family. It was strange but wonderful to be around so many people again, after the quietness of my work and previous home situation. The house was pretty crazy, with three generations living there, as well as seven cats and three dogs.

The longing for my own kitchen could not be ignored and, despite hearing that rentals were hard to get, I found an incredibly cute cottage the day after I decided it was time. It was up in the lower Blue Mountains, with a creek and bushland across the road. With no belongings at all to start with, I wasn't fazed. It felt right and the cottage had come my way so easily that my faith was strong. Everything I needed would come, and come it did, pouring forth in a torrent.

The owners of a storage shed business offered me some things they had been asked to clear out: a lounge from one shed, some linen supplies from another. My cousin had lived in the area for decades and had an established community of friends. Through that, a washing machine came my way from under someone's house. Then a fridge arrived, as did bookshelves, kitchen things,

curtains and an antique desk. A huge network of people pitched in with enthusiasm, giving me whatever they could, fascinated by my situation, and just being good-hearted people.

I bought a van as soon as I arrived in New South Wales. Although I wanted to settle, I was also performing at quite a few folk festivals and had been missing owning a bed on wheels. It helped maintain a sense of freedom, knowing I could still go away whenever I wanted. My timing of the van purchase and moving into the cottage was perfect: I moved in the same month as the annual council clean-up in the neighbourhood.

Furniture that people no longer wanted was left out on nature strips, to be thrown out or collected by whoever would like it, before the council's rubbish truck arrived. People waved to me from their verandahs as I collected small things from their piles, smiling and encouraging me to take whatever I wanted—a cane washing basket, a narrow cupboard for my pantry, an outside table. I also picked up quite a few classic pieces of furniture. Previous owners even helped me to load some of the things into the van, including an old but great lounge for my verandah.

I attended lots of bargain-filled garage sales, and had immense fun in the process. The only thing I wanted to buy new was a mattress. I wanted one that would be good for my back and that no-one else had slept on, with only my energy on it. A dear woman I knew a little gave me a housewarming present, because she was excited that I was settling down after so many years. Her gift was exactly the cost of a mattress. So within three weeks, I went from having six boxes that fitted into a small car to having a fully-furnished, two-bedroom cottage that looked like I had lived in it for years.

On my first night there, I lay in the middle of the living room floor with my arms outstretched and smiled hugely. My own space! At last, I had my own space again. The relief, gratitude and joy were so overwhelming that I hardly saw anyone for a month. I just couldn't bear to leave the house, except for work. On returning home, I would look at my place and start smiling all over again.

While I was not successful in getting the full amount of funds applied for, the prison program started with what I did receive. Just receiving the funds I did was an exciting achievement; I'd watched my idea turn into reality. As the funding was provided through the private philanthropic sector and the prison system did not have to pay me, I was a volunteer in their eyes.

My course outline had been approved. I demonstrated what I hoped to teach and achieve. Because the program was not accredited, teaching qualifications were not required. The staff in the Education Department simply believed in my ideas and ability, as I did, and were able to gain approval based on that, which in hindsight was fantastic. At the time, I didn't see it as particularly unusual. I was just going along with each step as it unfolded, until I finally found myself standing in front of a room full of convicted criminals, teaching them songwriting!

I'd never taught in any classroom environment, so to be standing there with dozens of eyes on me, many unfriendly, was pretty interesting. It may have been daunting if I had stopped to think about it, but I didn't. I just got on with the job. Until I had started liaising with the department, I had never been inside a jail either. So with lesson one prepared and a lot of guts, I began the class. It took some pretty dry humour to get any reaction at first. All the students just sat there stony-faced, checking me out,

and needing to stay cool in front of each other. But after a while, the women realised I was okay.

We were doing rhyming exercises. Instead of using some examples intended from my lesson plan, I began improvising and making the rhymes funnier and more relevant to the situation, laughing at myself with them.

I'm sitting here in my greens hoping for some tunes,
Is she just going to talk rhyming words all damn afternoon?
I want to learn to play guitar and be like Emmylou
So I'll stick it out with her a while, what else can I do?

Some of the women started to chuckle and contribute to the class, adding more jokes. This enabled the rest of the inmates to relax and contribute.

So come on Miss, get on with it and teach us what to do
Cos for rhyming we don't give a shit and we wish you wouldn't too.

Laughter broke the ice completely. When the shared theme of the music of Emmylou Harris was discovered, we were well and truly off and running.

Okay, okay I hear you all, but there are things you must learn
So humour me and do these rhymes, guitars then you will earn.
You will soon be playing songs from your own heart
But the longer you put off this stuff, the later you will start.

In reply I received:

Okay Miss if we must, we will write these silly rhymes
But don't linger with this stuff too long, I want a guitar that's mine.

The banter continued in rhymes and by the end of that first class, laughter was flowing freely. Most of the women were contributing well. It turned out to be great fun.

The staff members of the Education Department were good-hearted. It was nice to be working in a team environment again, after working one on one with clients in their homes for so long. The staff warned me, though, not to get too close to the inmates. I understood this was for security and privacy reasons, but could only be myself. I saw the students not as inmates, but as women learning to play the guitar and write songs. I was streetwise enough to remember I was in a jail, but I also lived by honesty. So I could still only be myself.

As a result of my sincerity and belief in each of them, barriers between us were dismantled over time, while trust was established and strengthened. We simply chatted as women. My encouragement to show their softer sides through songwriting allowed them to gradually remove some emotional walls built to protect themselves. The class became a very personal and healing space. It was from this perspective that I continued to design the curriculum.

Using various writing exercises, the women learnt to release their emotions and eventually write with hope. Songs of anger and hurt were written, certainly, but there were also songs of dreams and aspirations. I asked what they would do if they could do anything, if there were no limits on them in any way—financial, geographical or skills-based. With this to consider, they began daring to dream again, listening to their hearts. One wanted the freedom to live with her children, without having to answer to government departments. Another said she would be in a music video. One would have a tummy tuck. Another wanted to know

life without domestic violence (which she had *never* known). One wished she could be free of her drug addiction forever. Another wanted to visit Heaven and tell her mum she loved her.

As the honesty continued to flow, very few classes went by where tears were not shed. We had made a pact that it was to be a supportive environment, no matter what. Women who did not get along previously became tolerant, and eventually supportive of each other in class. One woman was not even going to join the class, due to another's presence. She did though, and within four classes they were giving each other genuine encouragement for their songs and getting along well out in the yard. This was the nature of the class. The courage it took to express themselves so honestly gained the respect of the rest of the class. They empathised and listened with genuine interest, as each of their songs evolved.

Learning to perform in front of the class was hugely confronting for them. But they encouraged each other, feeling the pain of each song's message. One student, Sandy, wrote about how hard it had been as a half-Aboriginal, half-white woman, who didn't quite fit into either part of the town she lived in. Others in the class knew the same feeling and encouraged her, recognising the need for these things to be expressed.

Another student, Daisy, had been in and out of jail so many times, mostly due to fighting within her own violent community, that she didn't even know how long she was in for this time. She said she would go numb and tune out whenever she was in a courtroom. It just overwhelmed her. (She was going to find out the length of her sentence soon after). She wrote of those feelings, how she hated being part of the system so much, never experiencing her own life anymore. Another student, Lisa, wrote

a song for her son telling him how proud she was of him. She choked up with emotion every time she played it, but was very proud of herself too.

Performing their songs in class was cathartic. It allowed their full expression, not just written expression, despite their nerves being challenged in doing so. Having been in a similar emotional place myself years earlier, just as shy and nervous, I gave them gentle encouragement. The walls of fear slowly but surely crumbled. A few months later when one of my students, who had initially been very timid, played one of her new, original songs solo in front of over a hundred inmates and visitors, it was me who was crying, joyfully.

The class numbers were not huge. This suited everyone. The first few classes were overflowing, too big for efficiency. After that, it was usually about ten regular students. Others would come and go. When they realised they wouldn't learn to play guitar like Eric Clapton in one class, and that the class involved genuine work, not all hung around.

It was best that the classes were small. The women needed a lot of attention and I was able to attend to each of them individually. The songs and stories that flowed were inspiring, healing and beautiful. The love that flowed between us all was also nurturing. Underneath the hardened exteriors were people like any of us: people who loved their children, yearned for love and respect, wanted to feel useful and live self-respecting lives.

Very few of the women were without guilt for what they had done. Most wanted to be better people. When I came to know each of their personal stories, all I could see were tragic histories, very low self-esteem, and cycles they couldn't break out of.

They were in for various crimes, some for working illegally as prostitutes. Some of those women actually worked the system to their advantage. They knew the sentence length of many petty crimes, so would commit one each year, enabling them to get off the cold streets for three months over winter, to a place where they would at least have a warm bed and regular meals. Others were in for crimes ranging from drug use or possession, violence, fraud, shoplifting (a habit one inmate got into to feed her family, then became addicted to), to driving under the influence of alcohol too many times.

Regardless of the actual reason, the prison system treated the crime, the effects. Their emotional wounds, the underlying causes of their actions, were hardly supported at all. While it was called a correctional facility, there was only limited help available for anyone seriously wanting to change their thinking and past patterns. This was what was most needed: help to break the cycles of low self-esteem, drug use, domestic violence, and the criminal life that had flowed from them. Perhaps some criminals would still commit crimes if given help. But those I came to know would certainly have changed their habits, if given ongoing support in and beyond their jail time.

There were some good people working in the system itself, but they were also up against it. There were also volunteers from church groups who managed to reach a few individuals, helping them to turn their lives around. But much more money was spent on security and red tape than on methods of healing or support. In a jail of about three hundred inmates, there were only two psychologists. They were often unavailable, due to lack of time and being overcommitted. If you didn't already feel pretty low

about yourself before you lived in a jail, you would certainly feel so during and after.

Having watched a fabulous documentary about the success of meditation in jails, turning people's lives around, I mentioned this to the staff. I also offered to put the right people in touch with them. Vipassana meditation had been taught to inmates in other countries with great success. I was told 'good luck' with a laugh and total discouragement. The system is so broken it may take a lifetime for such changes to be implemented.

So, instead, I worked within my capacity: with the students in my class, helping them to believe in their own beauty and goodness. This was through songwriting. Many of them had never had a compliment in their lives. They became like sponges when positive feedback was given, all of which was genuine. Any suggestion for improvement of their songs was always delivered through gentle appraisal.

There were funny times too, as they grew to trust me, educating me about life out in the yard. One day, one of the women was talking loudly to another about how she'd managed to score an extra pair of running shoes. When she realised I had heard her, she shut up immediately. With encouragement from me and other students, she explained the scheme to me. I commented that it was pretty clever thinking, only to hear, 'Well, we are crims, Miss. Remember where you are!' I had to laugh and agree. By that time, I had gained enough confidence and rapport for such a comment to not be at all intimidating.

Another student came to class one week looking quite wound up, yet exhausted at the same time. When I questioned if she was okay, she said, 'Yeah, I'm fine now, Miss. I've just had a terrible

morning. This chick has been giving me the shits for ages, so I put her head inside a clothes dryer. I'm fine now.' With slight astonishment I nodded, as if saying, 'I see.' 'Anyway Miss, it's all good. I'm here and it's time for music. None of that matters when I'm here. If I didn't have this class to come to, I might have killed her. But they'd ban me from this class and that would kill *me*.' With that, she sat down and continued working on her song from the previous week. She was actually a brilliant songwriter, with one of the nicest voices I've heard. I wish we had met through other circumstances, as I would have enjoyed sharing songs around a campfire with her. That was never going to happen though.

Week by week, more and more positive transformations were unfolding. It was wonderfully rewarding. The staff members in the Education Department were also delighted with the success and positive changes in many of the students who came through the program. The class soon became the highlight of their week and mine.

By now I had ended the long-distance relationship I had been in, despite us living closer to each other. I was never going to be able to move in the direction my heart was calling by staying with that man. Our values were just too different. While there were tears shed and necessary growth through the sad process of letting go, I had come too far in myself to start living a lifestyle that was not true to my own values.

Home life was beautiful. I delighted in playing host to friends who visited occasionally, instead of me doing all of the visiting as I had done in the past decade or two. After so much roaming, it was not entirely surprising to find myself very much becoming a homebody. I rarely felt any inclination to go anywhere. I realised that in the long term, I definitely wanted to work from home more.

During my spare time, I developed an online songwriting course, based on what I was teaching to the women in the jail. My writing was also gaining momentum, with articles being published in various magazines, and I was writing a blog. This attracted a lot of followers, which reinforced how much I loved connecting with like-minded people through my work. It also left me questioning whether I wanted to keep living the hard life of a performer. While teaching in the jail, my own music had slowed down a bit, though I was still doing some quality gigs now and then. When I was connecting with the right audience and was totally lost in the music, I loved it. But writing and working from home began to bring more contentment.

While the cottage and the jail job were great, there wasn't much else to keep me in the area. Friends had moved on and life had changed since I'd previously lived in nearby Sydney. A part of me also knew I would eventually end up living back in the country one day. In more than two decades of roaming, I had never lost the yearning for the space that farm life gives. I didn't make many friends in the new area, as I was becoming more reclusive, just loving being in my own place after years of roaming.

Without any conscious awareness, the students had become my most local friends. Over time, the walls between teacher and student, or employee and inmates, broke down considerably. The class simply became a place where a group of women played music. I felt there wasn't that much separating them from me; at times, I could just as easily have been one of them. That's how it felt sometimes, anyway. Certainly there were other moments when I didn't feel quite so. I hadn't committed a crime to validate me being there.

There was increasing closeness between us, as women bonded by the honesty we shared. My own fragility and painful past was still shaping me in many ways, though nowhere near as much as previously. Perhaps this strengthened my connection with the students. Their own pasts were also full of pain, various kinds of abuse, and a lack of self-worth resulting from that.

On first arriving at the jail, I was guided on how to deflect questions about my personal life. I never told the students where I lived; when they had asked I'd simply said I couldn't tell them, rather than point in some abstract direction or lie. The women were respectful of this, but I answered any questions I could. Through all of the honest conversations with dying clients in the past, I had come to enjoy being more open. The emotional walls of privacy just block goodness out. Truth brings people together. They asked questions about my past and I explained what I had stupidly tolerated from others and believed for too long.

The kindness from these women as a group and individually woke something in me that had been dormant for a very long time. Simply, I didn't know how to receive kindness. I knew how to give it, but not receive it. When I felt their love and genuine understanding of my pain, it was overwhelming. They really were the kindest and most beautiful of women. They had all suffered, and many were missing their children and families with enormous longing. Yet their hearts were incredibly kind. They had messed up and made mistakes, ending up in jail, but few were without regret. None were without a good and loving heart.

The funding was running out. After almost a year in the jail, I accepted that I wasn't only burning out from looking after dying people, I was actually burning out from life. There was just too

much sadness around me. When tragedy happened to a couple of close friends and I tried to be there, life became even harder.

Knowing how difficult it was to get the first round of funding, I wondered if I had the energy to do it all over again. Falling asleep that night, listening to my new neighbours having a screaming match with each other, I made my decision to return to country life. I had done all I was capable of at this point.

Most of my original students had been released by then, or were about to be. This freed me up a lot. Finding the clarity or energy for teaching new students was impossible. It was time to learn how to look after me. I gave my notice at the jail and to the landlord, and began making plans.

My parents were getting older. Mum and I were still beautifully close and I was enjoying an improved relationship with my dad. I wanted to be closer and more accessible to them, at least within a few hours' drive. (This is not far in an Australian's perception of distance.) I also wanted to live somewhere nearer the coast.

I chose a suitable area and began scanning the internet for house rentals. I decided which two towns I wanted to live between and what my rent limit would be. When nothing suitable presented itself within a couple of weeks, I put an advertisement in the local paper, stating clearly what I was looking for. A couple of situations were offered. Neither felt right, but I made new contacts. The availability of a great little cottage came to my attention soon after. It was exactly where I wanted, for exactly the amount of rent I could afford. Before I knew it, I was living on a 2,000-acre farm.

Darkness and dawn

A running creek passed in front of the cottage. This brought an ever-changing scene of wildlife and beauty. Magnificent, enormous trees dotted the landscape. Birds sang all day, while frogs sang all night. Millions of stars, not streetlights, shone brightly overhead as each evening arrived. It was absolute bliss, particularly when I played my guitar watching the sunset from a perfect verandah, or when rain pelted down on the tin roof. I was in heaven and said many, many prayers of thanks.

Country life had some sacrifices, like foregoing easy access to a range of live entertainment and arts. But there was enough around to suit me. My lifestyle would always take me away travelling somewhere on occasions anyway. It didn't matter. I was moving in rhythm with nature again and finally living the life that made the most sense for me. Five houses, including the farmer's, were dotted over the hills and valleys on the vast acres. As a tenant, I simply had to enjoy the space.

Returning to country life was a homecoming. My energy was very low after caring for so many dying people and then working in the jail, so I was happy to have a break and live off my savings for a little while. I planned to do some research on the new area,

deciding which direction to take when ready, following each step as it presented itself.

With each passing day I felt better, slowly rejuvenating. Positive energy and thoughts were flowing again. Wandering over hills and paddocks, delighting in the simplicity and complexity of nature, my healing and restoration felt well underway.

The previous years of growth, sitting at the bedsides of many wonderful and wise people, had definitely created a lot of positive shifts. I smiled at the memories, often recalling tender moments and beautiful conversations. Although that life now seemed a long way away, particularly as I walked the hills and valleys, it had shaped me hugely. I continued to feel overwhelmingly grateful.

Other than needing to spend some time at home and to continue my creative journey, I was out on a leap of faith yet again, trusting that the next steps would surely reveal themselves at the right time. With such natural beauty around me, the writing and music began flowing through marvellously. I adapted to the very simple lifestyle effortlessly, creating daily routines in rhythm with the natural world around me.

Well below levels of consciousness though, destructive patterns of low self-worth still lingered. Consciously, my thinking had changed a great deal over the last decade. Life felt easier than it had in years. I functioned from a place of peace and gratitude, restoring myself gently each day. Emotionally, I was doing well, or so I thought.

Then out of the blue, things took a twist in a completely unforeseen direction. After cruising along fine, feeling positive while restoring my energy, I was abruptly flung into the darkest depths of my healing. It buckled me completely.

Old patterns of suffering rose with the force of a live volcano. Nothing could hold them back. Snippets of long-forgotten memories burst up from deeper than ever before, bringing incredible pain. Every choice I had made as a little girl, to have kept silent or react in self-defeating ways just to keep the family peace and not antagonise anyone, had been registered and stored. The full and previously undisclosed price was about to be paid.

With no way of stopping it, my remaining energy drained out *completely*, almost overnight. It was as if someone had unplugged me from the power socket and I slumped into a pile on the floor. It seemed to happen so suddenly. Every ounce of energy was *absolutely gone*. Even solving the confusion of what was happening seemed too hard a task.

Ideas of finding casual work to make some local contacts flew out the window. The thought of facing anyone was impossible. The idea of working in any job for even a short while was out of the question. I was not capable; I was empty with absolutely nothing to give.

Anguish and despair accompanied the confusion. It was unbearably rough, as I swirled in a well of darkness, with no light to find my way out. I couldn't understand what was happening, other than that I was being forced to the very core of my pain and, hopefully, to its potential healing. No choice was on offer. It was all coming up, whether I liked it or not. There was no way to pretend I was okay or had the ability to function normally in the world.

Once the tears began, there was no stopping them either. Life was cracking me open. I needed to heal. Somewhere along the way, perhaps always along the way on some level, my heart had

actually asked for this healing. I needed to become the person I had been born to be, by breaking free of my past.

These months rapidly became the hardest I had known. My old life departed. Instead of creating a new life as expected, I slid further and further downwards, headfirst into a deep, dark pit of suicidal depression.

Those who knew me best could not believe that this was me: crying all the time, unable to lift myself up, no energy, no spark. I'd seen depression firsthand in others, and could never have imagined myself in such a place. But that's the thing with depression and what makes it so hard initially for many sufferers: the shock that it's happening to them.

Some friends refused outright to believe it. How could this be Bronnie, the one who always lifted everyone else up, but was now on the crash and burn? Some simply didn't know how to handle it, to see me in such a vulnerable place. The suggestions from other friends who phoned, people I thought knew me very well, were so far from what I was capable of that it left me feeling even more misunderstood and disconnected. If I could have been any sadder, this would have made me so.

The least of my worries was other people, though. All I was capable of attending to was myself and not even that at times. Suggestions continued from all angles as to how I should change my situation, but what people with depression need most is acceptance.

Depression is an illness that can be the most catalytic gift for positive transformation, if sufferers are allowed to move through it at their own pace. Depression is the name given to it in modern society. But it is, in fact, a time and opportunity for spiritual

transformation and awakening. It may be a breakdown, but it can also be a breakthrough, if approached with determination, the willingness to surrender, and faith. Of course, this doesn't actually make it fun.

Waking up sobbing before I'd even had my first thought for the day, I needed compassion and patience from those who knew me. Sometimes my waking thoughts were not even conscious, the tears just poured forth the moment I roused. At other times, it was sadness for myself and my situation: life just felt *so* impossibly hard and really, it had for years.

Acknowledging that I didn't have the energy to start all over again, yet knowing I had to, overwhelmed me. I couldn't even *imagine* having the energy to do this, let alone *find* it. Nobody was going to walk to my front door and offer me the perfect job though, particularly when I hardly knew a person in the area.

If I managed to vacuum my house, which took *so* much energy, it became a massive achievement, one I would acknowledge to myself: 'You did well today, Bronnie, you achieved something.' In previous times, I could have vacuumed five houses, gone out to lunch, walked a few miles and swum for an hour.

This is what depression is like when it first hits. It calls the shots. The best thing friends and loved ones can do is to accept that this is where the other person is. They may or may not come out of it. There is a good chance they will, especially if they want to. Acceptance supports this potential. Pressure hinders it. The person suffering also needs to accept that this is where his or her life is at, in order to not put pressure on his or her self, which only exacerbates the symptoms.

It took a while for me to reach this place of acceptance in myself, as I grappled with my inability to function in regular life. Coming back to a life on the land had tapped into somewhere so deep within that it accessed pain buried since my youth and my days as a young adult, when I had lived in a similar setting. Slowing down and returning to my roots as such, while no longer putting all my energy into looking after other people, proved to be a powerful combination.

The lid burst open from a tin of sorrow that had been securely and somewhat forcefully shut decades before. It had been seeping out gradually over the past decade, when I had embarked on healing and releasing whatever I became conscious of.

The utter sadness that now surfaced was raw and agonisingly painful, from places that were conscious *and* unconscious. Wretchedness from years of criticism and cruelty burst into consciousness: not being accepted for who I was, even as a sweet little child; the ridicule and yelling I had been repeatedly exposed to; and still being attacked as an adult, by those whose love I had most needed.

Most of my childhood had been lived in terror, just for safety and survival. My father's raging alcoholism, physical violence, and mockery, together with other family dynamics flowing from all that, were far too much for a gentle little girl. The many habits created from this, particularly in suppressing my feelings and expression, were determined to be cleared. Every ounce of sorrow stored continued to bubble up from the fiery depths. I cried and cried.

To benefit from true healing, there was no other option but to face what was in front of me: the pain, acknowledgement of

suffering, opportunity for growth, need for healing, and need to find strength by eventually becoming stronger than the pain. No-one could take my learning away. No-one else could do the healing for me. Love from others helped, but there was no escaping my own journey to recovery.

Releasing everything came through in a number of ways. There was crying, which was my constant companion. I wrote things out. For the first time in my life, I screamed too—not yelling, but truly screaming in a primal way. I was grateful to live so far from other houses, with the privacy to experience each day however it dictated. I screamed all of the things I wished I had said to those who had hurt me, when I was younger and growing up. I screamed sounds of grief with no words attached. I screamed in utter frustration of my situation, for the unbearable levels of heartache I was experiencing. I sobbed, deep and uncontrollably. I lay exhausted and, little by little, I healed.

In more sentimental times, I had often likened learning to be similar to a rose. We unfold layer after layer of our beautiful, delicate selves, and eventually get to the centre, the bud of who we are. In such a state of utter sadness and hopelessness, I threw that theory well and truly out the window. I decided that growth is more like peeling a very large onion. As we remove each new layer, it becomes even more raw and each layer just makes us cry harder. I was peeling a full-strength onion and a mighty big one at that! Every tear shed, every sentence written, every thought shared, revealed a new layer to be peeled away.

It wasn't happiness I was aiming for every day, just the strength to accept where I was. There was so little energy for anything initially, except for crying and watching as the world of nature

unfolded. Exhausted from the waves of release continuing on a daily basis, each day was just one of living in the present. Just surviving the intensity of emotions was enough, leaving me numb, emotionally worn out, and very, very tired with life.

Thinking back to my dear patients, I was reminded that happiness is a choice. Challenging myself to get out of bed or to see a moment of something beautiful in between the tears, were conscious choices. Choices and successes that may have seemed insignificant to others were now huge triumphs. Things that were once simple to me became massive achievements: getting out of bed, returning phone calls, getting the knots out of my hair, wearing nice clothes, or preparing healthy food when all I wanted to do was eat baked beans out of the tin.

I was not who I used to be anymore. If I were to become the person I was put on this earth to be, I had to accept my feelings, not reject them, allowing them to surface for permanent release. We all have to heal our own way. While swallowing happy pills was not the path for me, though I judge no-one for choosing that option, I still had to move through it in my own way.

Each day was different. Some days were full of darkness, tears and heartbroken sorrow. Some saw me functioning mildly, in an exhausted haze, but with determination to prepare a healthy meal and freeze extras, ensuring I would still be eating well on darker days. Other times, when I found the energy, I would walk over the back hills and paddocks, far from sight of humans, and just breathe in the sounds and sights of the natural habitat.

Meditation remained a part of daily life. I hate to imagine what I would have done without that skill. The preceding years of practice had helped to let go of an enormous amount of unhealthy

thinking. So it had to remain an integral part of my healing now. I wondered how anyone actually coped with depression without it. Being able to observe my thoughts and realise that they were not who I truly was became an incredible comfort at times. The thoughts were just my mind and while that was a part of me, it was not all of me, nor were all of the thoughts my own. Many had originated from the thoughts that others had projected onto me.

This awareness helped enormously as I sat to meditate at least twice a day, with the intention of taking true ownership of my own thoughts and mind. It took enormous determination to focus on my practice when so much sadness would surface, trying to distract me. But for the majority of those hours in meditation, I owned myself. By observing my thoughts while meditating but not attaching my focus to them, I returned to a place of stillness, a place of love and certainty, knowing that this turmoil would surely pass one day, realising that the peaceful part of me still existed within. I just had to work much harder to access it.

The discipline of meditation was very good for me. It meant that, despite my fluctuating moods, I had a commitment to honour daily: to sit and continue my practice, regardless of how lousy I was feeling. For some people, it may be the challenge of going to work that gets them through, or continuing some other routine. For me, it was my meditation practice.

Trying not to lose sight of a beautiful life potentially waiting for me, if I could get myself through this level of pain and healing, I held onto hope whenever possible. With the present moment so hindered by grief from the past, it was only hope of a different future that sometimes brought any prospect of joy. It played a large role in my healing.

In moments of semi-stillness, I dreamed of functioning again, of using the talents I had been blessed with (as we all are), earning good money doing work I loved, laughing with friends, owning my own acreage, daring to love again, and having a child. Mostly, I simply dreamed of knowing happiness again, of waking with joy and excitement, purely for the gift of being alive. I dreamed of being happy, yearning to remember what that felt like for more than a rapid, fleeting moment.

Living in such a magnificent setting helped greatly. There were so many intricate things happening in the natural world, enabling me to become totally absorbed in such moments: watching insects and birds, listening to the breeze in the trees, watching the sky and its constant changes.

A wonderful social worker, whose help I came to seek, was also a blessing. Not only did she practice the same meditation technique, she also held up a hypothetical mirror. I came to see myself from different angles, in kinder ways, acknowledging my own tender heart. I saw how much energy I had put into looking after others and not myself, never believing I deserved it. Much of this was due to old beliefs still affecting me on subconscious levels. A new determination arose to break free completely from those hindrances.

I had also taken on way too much pain from a friend who was going through a hard time herself, thinking I was simply being a good friend. But in swimming out to save her, I was drowning too. I needed to separate my compassion and empathy for everyone a little, by applying more detached compassion to those I empathised with.

Being reminded of the need for my own compassion was significant and liberating. My social worker also helped me see the bad habits I had previously developed in excusing other people's behaviour, out of wanting to keep the superficial peace and, more recently, out of compassion. Her wonderfully direct counselling style was definitely what I needed. Her honesty worked, particularly when she asked me if I was going for a gold medal in the carer's Olympics!

I had forgotten to share compassion with myself, both in thought and deed. All of the previous years of growth and letting go had not been wasted though, even if it sometimes felt that way. Instead, I had reached the true core of my wounds, the seed that many of them had originated from. This time was the gift I had subconsciously asked for to release them.

Acknowledging my heartache, the effects of decades of criticism from those whose love I most needed, ceasing to make excuses for unkind behaviour, and talking it all out took courage, my own permission, and my willingness to break free of those patterns forever.

The way to do this was by learning how to be kind to myself and to *receive* that kindness. Even if others did not believe I deserved goodness and happiness, that was irrelevant. They did not know the paths I had walked. It no longer mattered. I now understood that I deserved amazing goodness to flow my way.

Coming to this significant acknowledgement, that I *did* deserve it, allowed me to start receiving my own kindness. I had believed this already on other levels, but not at the depths I was beginning to operate from. That was where the refocusing was underway,

towards the levels that truly drove me. It was time to allow my own kindness in.

My old thinking patterns of low self-worth clung on fiercely. Some days it still took *everything* I had to be stronger than the sorrow. But with each layer conquered, glimpses of beauty and euphoria began creeping in. The simplicity of sun shining on leaves in nearby trees became so intrinsically beautiful that I was moved to moments of unexpected bliss. New parts of myself that had been incubating for years were becoming a more natural part of me. I acknowledged this with gratitude.

The beauty of my surroundings kept me very present. Any remaining heartache also tended to do that. However, the natural life unfolding around the cottage nurtured me and gradually overcame the sadness. As each layer of pain fell away, my senses became more heightened and increasingly in tune with the natural world. This was immensely encouraging.

Sometimes I became angry towards myself, because I wasn't getting over the depression as quickly as I wanted to. But anger directed towards anyone is just frustrated expectations. So I would let the expectation go and bring myself back to the present, by acknowledging something beautiful outside my window, putting some music on and singing along, or just bringing my awareness back to my breath or the sounds around me. Then I could accept my situation again, knowing I was working through it all at the right pace for my own growth.

One of my old friends sent me a constant supply of divine, organic skincare products. I would take time to carefully rub in the lotions, caring for and nurturing myself, both mentally *and* physically, balancing out previous unkindness towards myself. This

always left me feeling better, not to mention smelling gorgeous. Attending to my body with such pampering reminded me how I had nurtured my dying clients. I was starting to give myself some of the same love I gave them.

Being stronger than the pain *every* day was exhausting. While good days were definitely creeping back, depression and the negative thoughts that accompanied it seemed to fight back with even more determination. It was not letting go easily, being fuelled by negative patterns of self-condemnation that had ruled for more than forty years. My old mind did not want to lose control.

I was becoming my own master though, realising my worth and beauty, while directing my mind into more positive belief systems. Increasingly, I treated myself with new respect and love. Ditties about my own goodness started to flow, as I pottered about my home singing funny things. Saying hello to my dear self in the mirror when I'd walk past became entertaining. Ensuring my body was nurtured regularly with baths and healthy food also lifted me. Little by little, happiness was returning.

The old mind hated this, digging its ugly claws in deeper, refusing to let go completely. Depression was a determined opponent, trying to pull me back down deeply every chance it could. The restructuring of my thinking had already been in progress for years, but now a final dual was underway, where only one side could survive.

It was during this climax, this wrestle to say goodbye to my old self completely and forever, that I gave up. It was simply *too hard* to change who I was. Despite the improvements in my day-to-day life and increasing moments of happiness, I was utterly exhausted emotionally. It had taken *so* much energy to get to this point that

any drops of my remaining strength just dried up, delivering me to the final occasion of contemplating suicide. There was nothing left to hope for. Not one ounce of strength remained for more mental discipline. I had tried my best but was just *too tired* of it all. I wanted to die. I wanted this life to be over, once and for all.

A friend of more than twenty years was an angel, phoning regularly. Thankfully he had his own approach when talking through my answering machine. 'Pick up the phone. I mean it. You'd better not be fucking killing yourself. Pick up the phone! Stop ignoring me and pick up the fucking phone,' he would say, until I couldn't help but pick it up, laughing through tears. While his approach was somewhat unorthodox, his heart is one of the biggest I know. Humour had already helped us both through tough things in the past. His approach worked. I needed laughter and I knew he loved me dearly, as I do him. Laughter is a very underrated tool for healing.

On a day he didn't call, I reached the absolute darkness of anything I had experienced. I conceded, too tired to pick myself up again, ever. Scrawling a farewell note, unable to even write clearly, I gave up on life. It was too agonisingly hard.

They say the darkest hour always comes before the dawn. This was the darkest hour of my life. I could not live this life anymore. It was not possible to feel any worse than I did. I hated myself for not being strong enough to conquer my mind, despite my efforts. I hated that I had tolerated so much bullshit in my life from others. I hated that I had settled for such a hard existence so often. I hated that it took *so* much courage to create the life I wanted and deserved. I hated almost everything about myself. It was indeed the darkest hour.

The very instant I finished scrawling my farewell note of apology and utter sadness, the phone rang. I considered not answering it, but did with great reluctance. It wasn't the friend I thought it would be. It wasn't anyone I knew. Instead, a chirpy female voice said a bright and happy hello, then proceeded to offer me ambulance insurance.

'Great,' I thought. 'I can't even do suicide properly. I'll probably need a damn ambulance.' I had chosen a chasm in the local region that I was going to drive my van into, ensuring I would not survive. I had given a lot of thought to the act. I didn't want to do it by halves. Fine details had been considered in the planning.

The offer of ambulance insurance, which I declined through a haze of numbness and astonishment, truly reminded me that I may or may *not* succeed in my attempt. I thought about some lovely ambulance workers I had known over the years and realised how insensitive I had been, how consumed by my own pain I was, not considering the effect my act would have on whoever found me and on those who loved me. I also knew that I didn't want a life of paralysis if I was unsuccessful, particularly self-induced paralysis.

The power of such an interruption was absolutely heaven-sent. It was not only the symbolism of the ambulance, a significant wake-up call in itself, but also the phone call that broke the spell. The haze I was in at the very bottom of my pain cleared enough to let a glimmer of light through again.

This pivotal experience kickstarted the biggest turning point of my life. I didn't want to damage the body that had provided me with so much freedom and mobility, the beautiful, healthy body that had carried me through everything. I didn't want to die either. So as I rose and started to love my legs for lifting me,

and the countless miles they had already carried me. I also began to love all of me.

At the same time as that phone call, I had a moment of pain in my heart area. It was then I realised my poor, tender, beautiful heart had endured enough. It couldn't take anymore suffering or self-loathing. It needed love to heal and that love, above all else, had to come from me first.

No regrets

The speed with which things changed was phenomenal. Depression slipped away in the night, taking its heavy cloud of darkness with it. It had only ever been waiting for love to arrive. With that, its role was complete.

I spent the next few days restoring my energy through meditation, gratitude and reverence for my beautiful self. This nurtured my heart, while soaking in the bath nurtured my body. I took long, easy walks over the hills, not pushing myself, just walking gently and marvelling at life through the eyes of someone reborn. It was like waking up in a world so beautiful that it was difficult to remember the world before.

To signify the beginning of my new life, I decided to carry out a formal farewell and welcoming ceremony. I collected wood from the paddocks and lit a nurturing fire. There were things needing a proper farewell, aspects of my old self and the circumstances that had risen from that. I wrote these down, as well as things being welcomed. As the sun sunk behind the nearby mountain and the first evening stars came out, I stood happily by the healing fire. I read the words out loud from each slip of paper, old parts of myself, and thanked them in farewell. The paper was then dropped into the fire, disappearing with an acknowledgement

of finality. Each welcome was acknowledged with an open heart and increasing courage, each aspect and dream then ignited with warmth. Sitting out under the country sky afterwards, staring into the fire, I felt immense love for myself and life. I also felt immeasurable gratitude.

The firelight continued to burn warmly against the gentle darkness. Grinning, I looked upwards at the vast cover of stars and acknowledged that through all of this, someone new had indeed been born. My smile widened. The person I had been working for years towards becoming was now who I was. She had finally been allowed through. The person who had made too many excuses for others, had carried decades of pain, and who hadn't accepted that she also deserved great happiness was no longer required. Her role was complete. I thanked her gently for the part she played in my evolution.

Every day following continued to reveal delight on fresh levels. It was almost like discovering life for the first time. Never had I felt so free. A happiness I had not known before, completely unhindered, joyous and guilt-free, became a more natural state. New birds came to sit on the fence and sing. Old ones followed me when I walked the paddocks in a state of bliss. All of my senses became more heightened. I felt like I had just finished weeks of silent meditation, except this more alert state remained. Natural sounds were clearer, colours brighter and more alive. I noticed as least thirty different shades of green in the country surrounding the cottage.

There was space and clarity within that I had always believed was there, but had never quite known. My past was now of little relevance. My experiences to date had served as incredible learning

tools. Nothing had been wasted, but the suffering that had come to shape me had played its role and disintegrated. There was nothing to prove, nothing to explain, nothing to justify. My face ached from smiling.

Almost overnight, life shifted onto a completely different plane. Living presently was my way of life, after years of practice. The doors of opportunity then swung open. All of the past efforts on my creative journey, of focus, resilience and sacrifice, started to reap rewards with my work gaining huge momentum. New writing opportunities arrived from unimagined sources, bringing much delight. Love for myself opened the doors, allowing things to flow. It had all been waiting patiently for years, simply for my readiness.

As time has since unfolded, the natural flow of goodness continues to grow. New support systems have built themselves around me, both professionally and personally. Naturally, there will always be new things to learn about myself, but I never take even the tiniest blessing for granted anymore.

During the previous years, I had been consciously creating the life I imagined, by releasing my hindrances one layer at a time. Getting very clear about the life I wanted to live and the person I wanted to be was also a necessary part of the process. If occasional blockages now surface, I am patient and loving with myself while working through them. Self-discovery is more joyful. I can smile at my humanness.

After all that happened, I found myself feeling closer than ever to the dear people I had cared for in their passing. My new life unravelling was the kind they had each glimpsed as having once been possible, when they had looked back and spoken of their

regrets. In their final weeks and days, when all else had fallen away, they could see what potential joy life had offered them, if only they had lived differently.

Not every person spoke of regrets. Some people said they would have done some things differently, but were not consumed with actual regret. Some were beautifully content with the life they had led or were at least peacefully accepting. Many others did have regrets though, and had a strong desire to be heard, to have their thoughts known. The length of time I spent with each client was possibly a catalyst for the honesty our relationships came to share. For those large amounts of time, I will always be incredibly grateful.

Having received such gifts of wisdom, through the regrets they shared, I was determined to not feel the same at the end of my own time, whenever that was. But having now endured the biggest tests, I understood just how difficult the challenges could be. I also understood how joyous the rewards were by making it through. The potential for fulfilment and pleasure, that each of these dear people caught a glimpse of towards their passing, is what is on offer to every one of us *now*, before our own death arrives.

My lessons had been in how to allow it, which was through faith and self-love. I just had to get out of my own way first. That was where the real work lay—learning to own my own thoughts, by clearing away the debris that stopped me letting it all flow.

Learning would always continue. It was not like I would ever reach a stage of growth where I could say, 'Great! Now I can sit back, know everything, and cruise through every day without ever having to learn another thing.' Even Stella, who had done so much work on her inner journey, was reminded of the need to

let go and surrender at times. In doing so, she was able to become more peaceful in her remaining days, before leaving her life with a radiant smile.

So if the learning never stopped, I wanted to embrace it rather than resist it. Every day brought something new to learn about myself, but I could do so with loving kindness; loving myself with no judgement. Laughing gently and lovingly also allowed the growth process to continue more smoothly.

When Grace spoke the words: *I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me*, she carried such sadness about her life turning out the way it did.

It is a pity that being who we truly are requires so much courage, but it does. It takes *enormous* courage at times. Being who we are, whoever that is, sometimes cannot even be articulated at first, even to ourself. All we know is there is a yearning within that is not being fulfilled by the life we are currently living. Having to explain this to others, who have not walked in our shoes, may just leave us questioning ourself further.

As the wise man Buddha said more than two millennia ago: *The mind knows no answers. The heart knows no questions.* It is the heart that guides us to joy, not the mind. Overcoming the mind and letting go of others' opinions allows us to hear our own heart. Having the courage to then follow it is where true happiness lies. In the meantime, keep cultivating the heart while mastering the mind. As the heart grows, life brings more joy and peace. A happy life wants us, as much as we want it.

When Anthony lay is the nursing home and admitted to not having the courage to try for a better life, he sadly showed the consequences of being ruled by fear. That doesn't mean that we

too will end up in a nursing home before our time. But the lack of both stimulation and happiness that became a part of his life is no different from the lives of millions among us. Each day was just a mind-numbing routine, safe and secure, but never satisfying.

It takes fortitude to create big changes. But the longer we stay in the wrong environment and remain its victim, the longer we deny ourself the opportunity to know genuine happiness and satisfaction. Life is too short to watch it go by, just because of fear that can be conquered if faced courageously.

Like the vines trapping beautiful flowers in the garden of Florence's mansion, we are all capable of creating our own trappings. Obviously, many of these are not quite as easy to remove as her vine was. Most trappings have the strength of decades of growth behind them, and do not take kindly to being removed. They will hang on for dear life, strangling our beauty if we let them.

Just as they were created over time though, they can be undone over time. It is a delicate process of determination, bravery and, at times, letting go. It is having the courage to stop unhealthy relationships in their tracks and say 'Enough!'. It is treating ourself with respect and kindness, both of which we deserve. Mostly though, to break free of our own trappings, we must become observers of our own thoughts and habits. This awareness helps solutions become more apparent.

Life is our own, not someone else's. If we are not finding some element of happiness in what we have created and are doing nothing to improve on it, then the gift of every new day is wasted. A tiny step or small decisions are great starting points, as well as taking responsibility for our own happiness. A happy life can be found without moving house or doing anything drastic in our

physical world. It is about changing our perception and being brave enough to honour some of our own desires too. No-one else can make us happy or unhappy, unless we allow him or her to.

Having the courage to be ourself and not who others expect us to be may take a lot of strength and honesty. But so does lying on our deathbed and admitting that we wished we had done it differently. There were many other clients in between those mentioned. This regret—*wishing they had been true to themselves*—was the most common one of all.

When John said he wished he hadn't worked so hard, he was also speaking some of the most common words I would hear throughout those years. During his final weeks, sitting out on the balcony watching life on the harbour unfold, John was burdened with regret. As he said, there is nothing at all wrong in loving the work we do. In fact, this is how it should be. But we need balance, so work is not our whole life. I can still hear that dear man sighing deeply, as he came to terms with the choices he had made.

Listening to Charlie's insistence on the benefits of a simple life, I had to agree with his wisdom and life experience. Our true value is not what we own, but who we are. Dying people know this. Their belongings are of no consequence whatsoever at the end. What other people think of them, or what they have achieved in belongings, no longer concerns them.

None of the life reviews I witnessed from the side of deathbeds included the wish that they had bought or owned more, not even one. Instead, what most occupied the thoughts of dying people were how they lived their lives, what they did, and whether they had made a positive difference to those they left behind, whether that was family, community or whoever.

The things we often think we need are sometimes the things that keep us trapped in an unfulfilled life. Simplicity is the key to changing this. Letting go of the need for validation through ownership or the expectations of others also brings freedom.

Taking risks requires courage, but we cannot control everything. Staying in a seemingly secure environment does not guarantee life's lessons will pass us by unnoticed. They can still come out of the blue, when we least expect them. So can life's rewards, for those with courage to honour their hearts. The clock ticks for every one of us. It is our own choice how we spend our remaining days.

As Pearl understood, things flow when you need them. She believed the most important thing is to work towards finding our purpose; to do our work, whatever it is, with the right intention and not get trapped into unhappy work situations by a fear of lack. Learning and daring to think without limitations, and not trying to control how things will flow to us, were important messages she insisted on sharing.

Life is over so quickly. Some of us will live a long life. Many of us won't. But if we can know happiness and fulfilment in this brief time, there is no need for regret when the end comes, as it inevitably will.

Learning how to express feelings is unfortunately a challenge for too many adults. It is also a deep frustration and regret for dying people, including Jozsef. He wanted to express himself, but didn't know how. He'd had no practice. The heartache this brought to the lovely man was his greatest regret. He died feeling like his family had never truly known him.

Like anything, we get better with practice. By starting with small acts of bravery in expressing ourself, we become more at ease

with opening up and even begin to enjoy sharing such honesty. We will never be able to control the reactions of others. Although people may initially react in a negative way when we change by speaking honestly, it can raise the relationship to a new and healthy level. Either that or it releases the unhealthy relationship from our life completely. Whichever way, we win.

We can never know how long we are here for, or how long those we love will be. Rather than live with regrets before our dying time, we can ensure those we value know how we feel now. As dear Jude said, guilt is a toxic emotion. Expressing our feelings feels good too, once we get used to it.

If you are already carrying guilt from things left unsaid to someone already dead, it is time to forgive yourself. You are not honouring your life by carrying guilt forward. Be gentle with yourself. That was who you were then. It does not need to be who you are now. Compassion for who you used to be, given from who you are now, is the first seed of kindness towards self-forgiveness.

If people in our life don't appear to respond to our honest expression, it does not mean they haven't heard or that we should not have expressed ourself. Nanci, who had Alzheimer's disease, was a great example of this. Other relationships in my life have also been transformed through consistency of kindness and honesty. For a long time, it appeared my words were not heard. But when the other people were ready to express their feelings, it was obvious that every word *had* been heard along the way. It did not matter either way. I was peaceful knowing I'd had the courage to express myself honestly. Life is short.

Locating Doris' friend brought me true enjoyment and fulfilment. When she spoke of regretting not staying in touch

with her friends, I had no idea how often I would also hear this regret from other clients to follow. Having gone through what I did, and realising the value of old and loyal friends in carrying me through, it is easy to understand this regret. Most people have friends, but when it comes to the crunch, there are not a lot of friends who will be there through the absolutely hardest times. When someone is dying, that is one such time.

History and understanding are what friendships offer. As my clients were looking back over their lives, it was often friends they missed—friends to reminisce with. Life gets busy and friendships fade away. There will always be people who come and go in life, friends included. But those who truly matter, those who we love most dearly, are worth every ounce of effort to stay in touch with. They are the ones who will be there when we most need them, just as we will be there for them. Sometimes it is not possible to physically be there, but phone contact gives people a lot of strength and comfort during hard times.

Acceptance and forgiveness from friends assisted Elizabeth to find her peace after years of alcoholism. Not everyone was lucky enough to track down friends at the end, despite their desire to. That is why not losing touch in the first place is vital. No-one knows what lies ahead or when the time will come when we long for our friends. In between, we also have the gift of them in our lives.

Watching the roster of Harry's support team only emphasised how important friends are. While it can be a gloomy time of sadness for others, the person dying wants to enjoy their remaining time as much as possible. Friends bring humour to sad times, and happiness to the dying person. Whether we are dying or

not, friends are the ones capable of making us laugh through the worst of times.

Sitting beside me on her bed after she had screamed at me to go, Rosemary's admission of never having allowed herself to be happy was an honest one. It also improved her remaining time immensely. Rosemary hadn't believed she deserved happiness, due to not being what her family had expected her to be. When she realised she had a choice, she learnt to allow happiness through. Thankfully, Rosemary was able to discover a part of herself that had been dormant for most of her adult life. I saw her beautiful smile regularly during her last weeks.

Appreciating every single step along the way is a key to such happiness. As Cath contemplated her final time, she spoke of missing a lot of potential happiness by focusing too much on the results, rather than the journey. It is easy to think that happiness depends on something falling into place, when it is the other way around. Things fall into place when happiness is already found.

While it may not be possible to be happy every day, learning to steer the mind towards that direction is. Acknowledging something beautiful outside of sadness helped me to move back towards a place of peace myself. The mind may cause great suffering, but it can also be used to create a beautiful life, once mastered and used properly. Every single one of us has reasons to feel sorry for ourselves. Every one of us has suffered. But life doesn't owe us anything. We owe it to ourselves to make the most of our life and the time we have left, and to live in gratitude for that.

When we accept that there will always be learning, and that some brings suffering while some brings happiness, we reach a place of better equanimity. From this perspective, happiness becomes a

more conscious choice. The waves are no longer so tumultuous. Waves that may once have left us crushed and wounded may instead be ridden with the skills that come from experience and wisdom.

It is also perfectly okay to be silly and playful. We just have to give ourself permission. It is more than possible to do so without drugs or alcohol too. Taking life too seriously or being concerned about how we appear to others, can plant seeds of potential regrets, if we let such thoughts hinder our happiness now.

Perspective makes a huge difference to happiness, as beautiful Lenny showed. Despite the losses in his life, he focused on the gifts he received and saw his life as a good one. The same view we look at every day, the same life, can become something brand new by focusing on its gifts, rather than any negative aspects. Perspective is our own choice and the best way to shift that is through gratitude, by acknowledging and appreciating the blessings.

Some dying people experienced positive feelings of love and immense joy, when memories surfaced as they lived through their final weeks. Despite the anguish of regrets others shared with me, in the very end each of them found their peace. Many experienced a variety of emotions leading up to this, including denial, fear, anger, remorse, and the worst—self-condemnation. It was also important for many of them that others learnt through their regrets.

They were people who had been given the time to contemplate their lives. Those who go suddenly do not have such a luxury, and many of us will be among those. It is crucial to consider the life we are living now, as there may be little time given at our passing to find peace or for any contemplation. Instead, we will die knowing

that we have spent our whole life chasing happiness through the wrong channels, with it always remaining elusive, always just out of our grasp, always depending on the right things or situations to come our way. We will die knowing that the opportunity to change our direction well before it was too late just slipped on by.

The peace each of these dear people found before their passing is available now, without having to wait until our final hours. We have the choice to change our life, to be courageous and to live true to our heart, one that will see us die *and live* without regret.

Kindness and forgiveness are great starting points. Not just to others, but to yourself as well. Forgiving yourself is absolutely necessary. Without it, you continue to add fertiliser to the existing bad seeds in your mind, by being hard on yourself, as I once did. Self-forgiveness and kindness weaken the strength of those seeds. Healthier ones replace them and grow stronger in time, overshadowing the old seeds until there is nothing left to sustain their growth.

The bravery needed to change your life is easier to find when you are kind on yourself. Good things take time, so patience is also required. Every single one of us is an amazing person, with a potential limited only by our own thinking. We are all amazing. When we consider the numerous environmental and genetic influences that have shaped us, including the genes that have come to us through our own unique biology, it makes each of us a pretty amazing and special person. All of our life experiences so far, both good and bad, contribute to us being unlike *any* other person on this planet. We are already special. We are already unique.

It is time to realise your own worth and to realise the worth of others. Lay your judgements down. Be kind on yourself and be kind to others. No-one has ever truly walked in another's shoes, seen through another's eyes, or felt through another's heart, so no-one knows just how much another has suffered either. A little bit of empathy goes a long way.

Plant better seeds. Forgive and learn to be gentle on yourself, accepting your own humanness and frailty. Forgive others who may have blamed you for their own unhappiness. We are all human. We have all said and done things that could have been done in a kinder way.

Life is over so quickly. It is possible to reach the end with no regrets. It takes bravery to live it right, to honour the life you are here to create, but the choice is yours. So will be the rewards.

Smile and Know

When I look at my life now, there are moments that still blow me away. The life I imagined becomes more of a reality every day. The person I had imagined is who I am. It has come about through courage, resilience, discipline, and through learning to love my own heart.

Life *can* be easy and joyous. It can in fact flow well. The more we continue to accept we deserve all the goodness that comes our way, the more easily things keep flowing.

One little phrase kept my faith strong through that final, dark period: *Smile and Know*. On one particularly hard day, my old thinking was holding on for dear life, telling me I didn't deserve all I had dreamed of. My new thinking meanwhile was trying to move in permanently, reassuring me I did. So I prayed for some very simple, clear guidance. I needed something that would not be hard to remember in my tearful state, in order to conquer the hard days and keep me strong with hope. The words *Smile and Know* came to me.

I wrote these words down and put them in obvious places around the home. Whenever I walked past them, a commitment with myself was honoured and I would *Smile and Know* that this time would pass and good would follow. It was also much easier to

be strong in faith when I was smiling. It would automatically lift my mood, reassuring me that I would indeed find more reasons to smile again. There was no point reading the words without actually smiling though, as the smiling itself allowed the knowing to be easier. So smile I did.

Later, I added the words *Thank and Know*, ensuring prayers of gratitude were said in advance, with confidence and faith that it was all coming to me. *Smile and Know, Thank and Know*, became my mantra, as I went about my days smiling and knowing when I could. In doing so, I was walking in complete faith, which left me naturally wanting to thank as well. My prayers, dreams and intentions had already been heard. My only job was to *Smile and Know* and *Thank and Know*.

There were times when I was not strong enough to draw on these words, including that final day of utter sadness and resignation. But that time of surrender was the ultimate turning point. It was true I could not live with the pain of my past anymore. It *was* the end of my life, as I knew it at least. I just didn't have to die physically. Only that old part of myself died, spiritually and emotionally. Those old ideas of myself could not survive the bright light of my own love. The new life that had been quietly manifesting for years was finally able to be born.

While I was smiling and knowing, my dreams felt real and became even more a part of me. Hence, the doors of opportunity then swung open. The dreams had already arrived and were simply waiting for me to let them come through. So it was with a joyous heart I opened up, allowing things to flow. They did in many and various forms, personally and professionally.

Sometime later, as I sat in delighted shock at the suggestion from my dear parents to have a vegan Christmas, I smiled wholeheartedly, having just been given the best Christmas present in the world. For more than two decades, I had dreamed of at least a vegetarian Christmas. When it finally came about, it did so with such natural ease that we all agreed it was one of the most beautiful Christmas days we had ever experienced. With my mum chopping vegetables beside me, sharing cheek and laughter, my dad sorted out the music. Country tunes from the 1950s floated through the home, as we all laughed, chatted and prepared a great feast.

My work continues to grow and thrive, bringing satisfaction and enjoyment. While it is possible to find work you love while being employed by others, the best way forward for me was to work for myself. That is what I needed and wanted most anyway, to live my way, including through my work life. High levels of motivation and amazing clarity accompanied me onto my new plane of existence, along with the best from the old life, including self-discipline.

Making contacts in the local area, meetings were set up all over the place. Inspiration and ideas poured forth. Excitement built as I re-entered the world, creating new and positive opportunities for myself. Through a couple of community groups, I taught some songwriting workshops to disadvantaged sectors of society. Teaching again and being my own boss was wonderful. Watching the transformation of the students was also hugely rewarding.

After the seriousness of my past, it was time for more joy in my work as well. So I created a children's show, performing to children under five. Watching these delightful, uninhibited,

little humans dancing and jumping around to my new songs has been delightful. Writing opportunities also flowed, as did a new album's worth of adult songs. My blog experienced further massive waves, bringing more people to my work. Not only did new ideas flow forth, motivated action also accompanied them. It amazes me what we are truly capable of, creatively and physically, when we let go of all that holds us back.

As I now share my autumn nights snuggled up with a lovely man, I smile at how much life can change. He is a dear person. There were things we both had to let go of, before we could find each other. But timing is an amazing thing.

In the very best of ways, I have been reminded about the cycles of life. Death has certainly been shown to me directly through others. I have also known my own kind of death, a spiritual one, by watching those old parts of me finally cease to exist. It was the birth of a new spirit: one I had always suspected was there, one who I wished to be. While it was a painful death, it was what truly freed me from the conditioning of my past, of unnecessary burdens.

With the real me allowed to live unhindered, I continue to evolve into who I *really* am. It is only through shedding old parts of me that I am able to actually know who that is, and I love her. I love her courage. I love her heart. I love all of her.

In the best possible way, I have also been reminded of other new beginnings. A precious baby now grows within me. I have been blessed with the opportunity to become a mother. As my womb expands and my body swells in the divinity of womanhood, I am in bliss and overwhelming gratitude to know such an experience. It is a world away from the life I once knew, of isolation, sadness

and hopelessness. I am reminded of just how much we can fit into one lifetime. Thank goodness I did not end my life back then!

The bond between mother and child grows daily. I have also been blessed with great health throughout, much to the misfortune of other poor pregnant women suffering morning sickness. I absolutely love being pregnant. Soon I will be guiding another soul through their human journey, until they are old enough to fly in directions of their own choice. Life may certainly have its share of death and endings, but it has its share of birth and beginnings too. I am grateful to have been exposed to both, literally and symbolically, on so many occasions.

Whenever on a leap of faith, things have never turned out as I imagined, but in the long run they have turned out better. Faith is a powerful force, one that creates incredible blessings. Letting go of limitations and trying to control how things will flow is an immense gift to ourself.

Strangely, one of the hardest things for many, as it was for me, is to learn how to receive—to realise we deserve it, then allow the goodness to flow. Most of the miraculous solutions that have flowed to me throughout my life have come via other people. We are *all* much more interconnected than we acknowledge, and play bigger roles in each other's lives than we know.

Learning to receive is a necessity, if we are truly open to seeing our dreams realised. As any person who is a natural giver knows there is great pleasure in giving. But if we are a giver without allowing ourself to also receive, then not only are we blocking the natural flow of things to us and creating an imbalance, we are robbing someone else of the pleasure of giving. So allow others to give too. It is only pride or lack of self-worth that stops anyone

from being able to receive and every single one of us deserves such goodness.

If you are one who does not know how to actually give, then keep practising. Just try it without expectation. Giving for the simple pleasure of it feels good. To do so with accountability is not truly giving, nor is reminding people of it later in anger or waiting for the good to flow back. Those who give with the sole intention of generosity *are* rewarded, but not always immediately and not necessarily in ways imagined. We need to allow flow in both directions. This includes giving and receiving with our own self too.

It is possible to change the world and us. As we improve our own lives, and work towards having no regrets, we naturally improve the lives of those around us. It is possible to reverse the segregation and disharmony we have created in society. It is possible to be happy. It is possible to work towards dying without regrets while still alive and well.

We are all fragile in our own way, like globes of delicate glass. Imagine the old light bulb with the roundish glass surrounding the globe. (It doesn't create quite the same image, if you imagine the new energy-saving tube-like light globes, though either will suffice.) A part of all of us is like a delicate light globe. A beautiful light shines from within, one that can remove darkness from any place. When we are born, we are shining bright, bringing great light and happiness to all. People marvel at our beauty and light.

Then over time, muck starts being thrown at us. This muck is not about us. It belongs to the people who are throwing it, but they hurl it regardless. After a while, it is not only those close to us who throw muck on us. It is schoolfriends, workmates, society,

and many others we come across. It affects us all differently: some become victims, some bullies, some take it in and it stays within for a long time, some appear to let it go naturally. Regardless of how it affects us, it hinders our original light and goodness from shining at its absolute best.

With so many people throwing muck on us, we figure that they must be right. So we join in, throwing muck on ourselves too. All of the muck throwers can't be wrong. If we are going to throw muck on ourself, then it must be normal and okay to throw muck on others too. We throw some more and continue to let others throw it on us. Eventually, we are carrying so much muck that not only are we weighed down by it, but our light cannot be seen anymore. Every inch of us is covered in muck, a lot of it from what others have thrown and some from when we joined in and started throwing it on ourself as well.

Then one day we remember there was once a beautiful light shining in us. But things have been dark for so long, we hardly remember that part of ourself. It can still be felt sometimes, when we are quiet and alone. The warm glow has remained shining all this time, regardless of the darkness surrounding it. We realise that we want to shine again. We want to remember who we were when we are not carrying other people's muck on us, nor our own.

So we start saying we have had enough. We stop allowing anyone else to throw muck on us. People don't like this, but we are determined, moving out of reach of the muck throwers. We start rubbing very gently and slowly to remove some of it off us. It has to be done very tenderly. We are incredibly fragile underneath. If we try to do it too roughly or hurriedly, we will shatter and never know our light again.

We slowly and patiently work away at cleaning it off. A tiny ray of light breaks through and we are given a glimpse of our own beauty again. It feels good. Then someone throws some more muck at us and we have to start removing it again. We wipe that bit off and clean some more away. Frightened by what we see though, we then throw some at ourself. We don't deserve to shine this brightly. Here, have some more muck! But the light has caught a glimpse of the outside again and starts to shine brighter. It wants to be seen.

With each bit of light that starts shining out, we start feeling better. It gives us a taste of how great it could be, free of all that we are carrying. This makes us recognise just how much everyone else is also carrying. We develop compassion. We decide that from now on, we are not going to throw any more muck on others. After all, how can we all be shining at our best if we keep throwing it all over place and on each other? We get back to work on ourself, very gently rubbing a little more off. It takes much patience and gentleness, working on a little bit at a time, but excitement builds each time another pocket of light breaks through. We catch another glimpse of our own beauty and radiance.

At times we are tempted to throw some more back on ourself or others. We have been in the habit of it for almost all of our life. But now we see how the little bits of light shining out of us are helping others, who are also becoming more courageous. They start cleaning off some of their own muck. They have to be very gentle too. Everyone is delicate and fragile underneath, and can shatter very easily. We also want to help others clean theirs off, but they have to do it themselves. No-one but them knows just how fragile they are underneath.

We can show others how we did it. It may help them, but they have to do the work themselves, at their own pace, in their own way. Not everyone has the courage or strength to do it all at once. We are patient, respectful and compassionate. We now understand that learning to shine our light can sometimes be a very painful and frightening experience.

We feel good about ourself. This is a new feeling, but we like it a lot. So we give up throwing muck on ourself forever. We are beginning to love the beauty we have discovered, as our light continues to shine brighter. There are rays of light coming out at all angles now. Some of the oldest muck is still very stuck though, making it the hardest to remove. It has grown very comfy there over the decades. It does not want to go anywhere. The closer we are to the glass, the more delicately we have to rub, yet the more stubborn and determined the muck is at this level.

It has been such a big job. We become very weary. Maybe this will be enough. We are already an improvement on who we were. Maybe we can live with this last layer of muck, just shining as we are now. But the light is strong and determined. It wants us to shine at our brightest. It somehow gives us even more strength. We return to cleaning away the last of it.

Finally, we have done it. Our brightness astonishes everyone, especially ourself. We had no idea we could be so beautiful and shine with such radiance. Now when we hang out with other light globes, they too want to shine brightly. They can see our beauty. It reminds them that they also have such potential inside of them. They had just forgotten it, with all of the muck they were carrying.

Some light globes think it is too hard to let their light show. They stick together in the darkness, trying to convince themselves and each other that they are happy this way. Who needs all that hard work, when we have become used to carrying our muck? 'I like it this way,' they say, 'and I am going to throw some more muck around. I am going out there right now to throw some on those bright lights who are happily having a good time. How dare they have so much enjoyment?'

The dark globes head outside with all of the muck they can find and start throwing it. They work better in a team, with safety in numbers, but they can't see as clearly anymore. Everything is so bright with all of this cleaning going on. Still, they spot a few light globes that are now shining brightly and happily, as they have almost finished removing their muck. The dark globes throw heaps of it at those bright ones. It doesn't stick though. It used to always stick.

What they didn't know was that even though the light was hidden for all of those years, it had still been growing inside. Now it shines so warmly and brightly that their muck will never stick again. It just slides off, without leaving a mark or impression.

Our own glow is like that. We have a light within that is magnificent and potentially radiant. But we need patience and tenderness with ourself, to remove all of the muck we have been carrying for decades. As each little bit is removed, a little more of our true self shines through.

Each of the regrets, shared from the bedsides of those now dearly departed people, takes courage and love to conquer. But the choice is ours. Like a light that wants to shine brightly and

cheerfully, we have a guidance within that leads us through, one step at a time.

Be who you are, find balance, speak honestly, value those you love, and allow yourself to be happy. If you do this, you will not only be honouring yourself, but all those who despaired in their final weeks for not having had the courage to do so. The choice is yours. Your life is your own.

When challenges are thrown your way and you are wondering how on Earth it will all come together, how you will find peace about a particular relationship, when the contacts you need will arrive, or how you will find the money to make something happen, just remember that what your heart wants, you want too. You just have to get out of the way sometimes. Take what action you can and then let go.

Stand tall, take a deep and loving breath and walk on, being proud of who you already are. Have full faith and confidence you deserve it, that your prayers have been heard and are already on their way to you. And simply remember one little phrase: *Smile and Know.* Just smile and know.

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I am especially grateful to every dear person whose bedside I sat beside, for their vulnerability and courage when sharing their learning and regrets. While it seemed I was there to serve, I received so much more than I could ever give. Thank you also to the families who welcomed me in during such sad, life-changing times.

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I am also grateful to all who have made it possible for this book to reach you and connect us. To all of my publishing teams worldwide and all who help these important messages reach others through word of mouth, thank you.

To every person who finds the courage to honour his or her heart and make the world a better place as a result, I thank you too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Photo credit: Bronnie Ware

Bronnie Ware is the author of the international bestselling memoir *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*, published in 31 languages, with a movie in the pipeline. Her second book, *Your Year for Change*, is a collection of inspirational reflections for regret-free living. Despite the huge success of *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*, this second book remains the heartfelt favourite for some of Bronnie's readers. Her powerful third book and second memoir is *Bloom*. It is Bronnie's personal favourite, sharing her incredible journey through the lessons of surrender.

As well as being an author, Bronnie is an inspirational speaker, songwriter and mama to her daughter, Elena. Bronnie lives in northern New South Wales, Australia. Her favourite role is as a mother. Her favourite teacher is nature.

Bronnie is also a teacher of courage and a great advocate for leaving space to breathe.

To learn more about regret-free living and truly create the life your own heart yearns for, visit her website.

www.bronnieware.com

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We'd love to hear from you!

'Bronnie's work is a gift to the world. Her revelations on living regret-free are a continued source of inspiration. They fuel me to stay focused on what truly matters most.'

Marie Forleo, creator of MarieTV and author of *Everything Is Figureoutable*

Based on the blog post that reached 8 million readers.

After too many years of unfulfilling work, **Bronnie Ware** began searching for a job with meaning. Despite having no formal qualifications or experience, she found herself working in palliative care.

During the time she spent tending to the needs of those who were dying, Bronnie's life was transformed. Later, she wrote a blog post about the most common regrets that the people she had cared for had expressed to her. The post, also called 'The Top Five Regrets of the Dying', has been read millions of times all over the world since it was first published.

By applying the lessons of those nearing their death to her own life, Bronnie developed an understanding that it is possible for everyone, if they make conscious choices, to die with peace of mind.

Bronnie's delightful memoir is a courageous, life-changing book that will leave you feeling more compassionate and inspired to live the life you are truly here to live.

Bronnie Ware is an author, speaker and songwriter based in northern New South Wales, Australia. Her favourite role is as a mother. Her favourite teacher is nature. Bronnie is also a teacher of courage and a great advocate for leaving space to breathe. To learn more about regret-free living and truly create the life your own heart yearns for, visit **www.bronnieware.com**

'Heart-rending.'
The Sunday Times

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